

NEWTON, JAMIAN D., Ph.D. Meanings of Athletic Identity within the Multidimensional Self and Social Context. (2020)  
Directed by Dr. Erin J. Reifsteck and Dr. Diane L. Gill. 128 pp.

The topic of athletic identity has garnered increased attention in recent decades. While there have been shifts in understandings, the majority of studies rely on the original conceptualization of the construct based on Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder's (1993) work (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016a). Little to no research has assessed athletic identity within a conceptual framework that depicts the overall self-concept and related context, which would display clearer connections to identity theories (Burke & Stets, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2016a). Thus, the current investigation was guided and organized within the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) framework, a comprehensive model depicting the multidimensional self as situated within the greater context that influences identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). The current study used a qualitative descriptive approach framed within a constructivist epistemology to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the holistic self and context.

Participants included twelve NCAA Division I student-athletes across the following team sports: soccer, softball, and basketball. Participants completed individual semi-structured qualitative interviews which included an identity mapping activity consistent with the RMMDI framing. Three themes were generated using reflexive thematic analysis: Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self; Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture; and "It's a Lifestyle": Passion for the Game. Results indicate that athletic identity was one of the few most personally important identities within the

multidimensional self. Participant accounts demonstrate that athletic identity can be positioned and described as a core identity (e.g., central; primary within self-view) or as a salient identity (e.g., important; on secondary-level within self-view). This positioning of athletic identity in relation to other identities (i.e., described in two orientation groups) seemed to be influenced by the broader sport context and connected with corresponding athletic lifestyle behaviors. Participant descriptions support that continued immersion in sport culture and engaging in athletic lifestyle decisions can reinforce the identification with the athlete role. Practical implications and related competencies for the fields of sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development are provided. These implications include, but are not limited to, the following: acknowledging and respecting the importance of athletic identity for individuals, working to facilitate self-reflection, striving to understand contextual factors that influence identity, and attending to these personal and contextual influences to work toward developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive practice.

MEANINGS OF ATHLETIC IDENTITY WITHIN THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL SELF  
AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Erin Reifsteck and Dr. Diane Gill, as well as my committee members, Dr. DeAnne Brooks and Dr. Laura Gonzalez for advising me and for their contributions to this project. I would like to acknowledge Brittany Holland for her assistance with data analysis in this study. I would also like to thank the faculty and staff members at different institutions that helped in the recruitment for this project.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The study of athletic identity has garnered increased attention in sport and exercise psychology literature in recent decades. While there have been shifts in understandings, the majority of studies rely on the original conceptualization of the construct based on Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder's (1993) work (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016a). Brewer et al.'s (1993) seminal work provided a foundational understanding on which to conduct survey research on athletic identity, resulting in established links between the construct and relevant outcome variables (e.g., athletic transition concerns, disordered eating, athletic social relationships; Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2017; Horton & Mack, 2000; Voelker, Gould, & Reel, 2014). However, the emphasis on survey approaches has resulted in an incomplete understanding of athletic identity as deeper meanings of the construct are taken for granted (Ronkainen et al., 2016a; 2016b). In order to deepen the understanding of athletic identity, it is necessary to use methodologies that examine the meaning and complexity of the construct. Further, little to no research has assessed athletic identity within a conceptual framework that depicts the overall self-concept. Identity theory explains that individuals have several identities arranged in a hierarchal manner which are influenced by contextual factors (Stryker & Burke, 2000), supporting the importance of studying athletic identity within the holistic self and social sphere. The Reconceptualized Model of

Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI), a framework originally used to explore college student identity in student development literature, provides a model in which athletic identity can be examined and positioned within a comprehensive representation of the self (Abes, Jones, McEwen, 2007). Thus, the present study was guided and organized within the conceptual framework of the RMMDI. Further, the current investigation used an inductive, bottom-up approach framed by a constructivist epistemology to explore the meanings of athletic identity taken from current collegiate student-athlete perspectives.

A clearer conceptualization of athletic identity is of particular importance as it pertains to the student-athlete population. Most studies that have used inductive approaches to assess athletic identity focus on elite, professional athletes (e.g., Stephan & Brewer, 2007); little to no research has used these approaches to explore the meaning of athletic identity from participant perspectives in collegiate sport (see Review of the Literature). Collegiate athletics provide a relevant population for such an investigation. Student development literature supports that college students face several challenges pertaining to personal growth, relational maturity, and professional development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Indeed, college years are commonly recognized as a transformative time where students transition to adulthood. The shift from adolescence to young adulthood is viewed as a critical time for identity development due to the challenges associated with this period (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Jones & Abes, 2013). College environments can provide a vast amount of learning opportunities that contribute to the process of identity development and the transition into adulthood (e.g.,

living away from home, decisions on coursework, plans for future career, involvement in organizations). Student-athletes face the challenges common to all students while also fulfilling the responsibilities of the athlete role, making student-athletes a unique population on campuses. Further, student-athletes likely have salient athletic identities that are important to the self-concept due to their consistent involvement in sport that enabled these athletes to reach the collegiate level.

Ronkainen et al. (2016a) argue that athletic identity research must show clear connections to identity theories. Examining the construct within an appropriate conceptual framework (i.e., RMMDI; Jones & Abes, 2013) strengthens literature because depicting athletic identity within the multidimensional self and social sphere is consistent with psychological identity theories (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The current investigation provides a more complex view of athletic identity as meanings are explored within a fitting framework which both extends the knowledge base and informs professional practice. Adding to the current conceptualization of athletic identity is relevant to the fields of sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development, as detailed in following sections.

### **Current Conceptualization of Athletic Identity**

Since Brewer et al.'s (1993) seminal work, athletic identity has been commonly defined as the extent to which individuals identify with the athlete role. Athletic identity is understood as a self-schema and as a social role (Brewer et al., 1993). Thus, individuals with salient athletic identities can organize and process information from an athletic viewpoint (e.g., maintain healthy diet to optimize performance). As a social role,

both group membership and social appraisal are important for maintaining athletic identity (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010). The seminal athletic identity work also provided initial validation of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993), which was later revised to include seven items assessing athletic identity. This instrument assesses the following elements: social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). Social identity is defined as the extent to which individuals view themselves as athletes. Negative affectivity describes adverse emotional reactions to decreases in performance. Exclusivity is defined as solely identifying with the role of athlete.

While there are benefits to the survey approaches using the AIMS, there are notable shortcomings. In Brewer et al.'s (1993) initial work, athletic identity was defined and operationalized, enabling researchers to assess relationships between athletic identity and other variables. Specifically, Brewer et al. (1993) aimed to measure the strength and exclusivity of athletic identity. This goal is far different from understanding the meaning and complexities of athletic identity. To reach the goal of deepening the understanding of athletic identity, it is important that researchers use appropriate methodologies.

More recently, researchers have examined athletic identity with the use of different methodologies (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Most notably, Carless and Douglas' line of research provides information on cultural scripts in athletics (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a; Carless & Douglas, 2013b). These studies provide evidence supporting the dominance of performance narratives in athletics with a focus on winning and

achievement. Further, the researchers identified discovery and relational narratives, where athletics can provide opportunities and where interpersonal relationships are most salient in sport (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006). These studies reflect the emergence of constructivism in athletic identity research (Ronkainen et al., 2016a). Such approaches emphasize that identities are dynamic, organized in the multidimensional self, and that meanings are constructed in interactions with others in the social sphere.

While different approaches have been included in the literature in recent years, more research is needed to examine personal meanings that athletes attribute to their experiences (Ronkainen et al., 2016b). Research on cultural scripts that impact athletes have importance, but such approaches can overlook the meaning making processes of the individuals. Researchers must explore the agency and ownership that athletes have in their experiences. Additionally, narrative approaches emphasize the story of the athlete, which can shed light on identity development as seen in the narrative, but these approaches can be described as indirect when compared to approaches that center on identity itself rather than stories. Studies on athletic identity have not yet fully explored the construct within a framework that situates athletic identity within the multidimensional self and larger social context. With such an approach, findings could be more clearly situated within identity theories which suggest that individuals hold several identities that are influenced by environmental factors (Stets & Burke, 2000). Further, with more direct approaches, where researchers intentionally focus on exploring meanings of athletic identity taken from participant responses, studies can further the understanding of the construct based on student-athlete accounts.

## **Value of RMMDI**

The RMMDI provides a framework for examining the complexities of identity. Common understandings of identity support that individuals have multiple identities that are integrated into the holistic self. Further, such identities are arranged in a manner where certain identities hold greater internal relevance (i.e., salience) than other identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). The RMMDI provides a model for better understanding the complexities of individual identities because personal identities, social identities, and identity salience are all represented in the model. In this framework, core identities and social identities are represented within the holistic self with more salient social identities positioned more closely to the core. Additionally, the holistic self and contextual factors impact one another; the extent to which contextual factors impact individuals depends on their meaning-making capacity. Consistent with the shift toward constructivism in athletic identity research (Ronkainen et al., 2016a), the RMMDI frames the multidimensional self as situated within the greater context that influences identity (Abes et al., 2007).

Rather than examining athletic identity as separate from the holistic self and social context, the RMMDI model allows for the construction of a comprehensive representation of the self-concept. Investigating this construct within the RMMDI framework can illuminate ways in which athletic identity is positioned within the self and influenced by external factors. Through self-reflections with the use of the model, participants can expound on reasons for the positioning of their identities in the model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013). For instance, athletic identity may be positioned

as an identity situated closely to the core in the model, and participants could explain their rationale for this designation. Additionally, student-athletes can provide details on contextual influences that impact their athletic identity. Such findings from participant positioning on the model, and interpretations of such positioning, provide a more nuanced understanding of the construct.

The RMMDI provides a framework for better understanding athletic identity for the current investigation. To work toward goals of examining meanings of athletic identity within this framework, it is necessary to utilize approaches that assess depth and complexity of understandings that arise from the positioning on the model and individual interpretations of such positioning. The RMMDI was formed through qualitative investigation (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000), and such approaches fit in the current investigation. This study used an inductive, bottom up approach grounded in a constructivist epistemology which is consistent with the framing that led to the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013).

The current direction addresses key gaps in the literature. More specifically, many studies rely on the Brewer et al.'s (1993) definition of athletic identity (i.e., the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of athlete). Few studies have examined the complexity of the construct (e.g., Newton, Gill, & Reifsteck, in press). Several studies that have used methodologies that can assess deeper meanings have not examined the meanings of the construct from participant perspectives. Such studies often focus on ways in which sport culture shapes experiences as opposed to how athletes view themselves. Further, studies have not explored athletic identity within the framing of the

RMMDI, a model that provides a comprehensive representation of the self-concept within the social context. To address these gaps, the current investigation used the RMMDI and a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000; 2010) to assess the complexity of athletic identity taken from current collegiate student-athlete accounts.

### **Purpose and Aims**

The purpose of this investigation was to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context. The guiding research question in the study follows: What are the meanings of athletic identity taken from the view of student-athletes who participate in team sports at Division I universities? To address this question, the investigation was guided and interpreted within the framing of the RMMDI.

Depending on paradigmatic perspectives, an aim to find the meaning of athletic identity can be viewed as difficult or impossible. A perspective of positivism or post-positivism may argue for more singularity of meaning while a perspective grounded in relativism may contend that the meanings are multiple and fragmented. Gill, Williams, & Reifsteck (2017) discuss the complexity of human experiences, noting how competing claims of human behavior can both be true: individuals are all alike and individuals are all different. Thus, athletes have similarities and differences that relate to personal experiences, athletic careers, and self-perceptions. With grounding in a constructivist epistemology and by using an inductive approach, the goal is to allow participant responses to inform the discussion of meaning. Rather than pursue a singular meaning, the aim of the investigation is to converge on findings that are developed from participant



perspectives on athletic identity. The study aim was to understand similarities while recognizing differences in perspectives to elucidate meanings that emerge across different athletes.

### **Significance of Study**

The current investigation is relevant to several fields, including, but not limited to, sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development and higher education studies. In sport and exercise psychology, the studies that have used constructivist approaches often focus on elite, professional athletes. Such research provides a narrow view as only a small percentage of athletes reach professional levels. To bolster the sport and exercise psychology literature, it is important to examine athletic identity in other settings such as collegiate athletics. While collegiate student-athletes are also viewed as elite, these athletes comprise a population that is considered more common when compared to professional athletes. Roughly 492,000 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes compete in collegiate sports and fewer than two percent of these student-athletes go on to professional athletic careers (NCAA, 2018). While the aim of the study and design does not support claims of external validity, the focus on examining athletic identity in collegiate student-athletes may produce findings with broader transferability than a focus on professional athletes. In addition, examining athletic identity in this population is also helpful because student-athletes likely view athletic identity as personally important due to their current participation and past experiences in athletics (Burke & Stets, 2009).

In addition, the study of athletic identity in student-athletes is important for counseling and student development professionals. Student-athletes are considered a special population on college campuses because student-athletes must balance at least two demanding roles (Lippincott & Lippincott, 2007). In addition to the challenges of developing personally and professionally (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), student-athletes hold another role that can be physically, emotionally, and mentally draining. Further, student-athletes are not always respected in their roles (e.g., dumb jock stereotype). According to identity theory, role performance corresponds with identities, and identities lead to role performance in a reciprocal process (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Thus, counseling and student development professionals must recognize the unique challenges student-athletes encounter in balancing both academic and athletic responsibilities, while understanding that this balance can influence identity. This process of balance and directions for student-athlete support can be better understood by exploring ways in which student-athletes describe and position self-identities with the use of the RMMDI.

Greater understandings of the complexities of athletic identity taken from the student-athlete perspectives have implications for counselors, sport psychology consultants, and psychologists. It is important that practitioners be able to competently work with athletes. In a study explaining essential counseling competencies when working with athletes, Ward et al. (2005) found that 19 of 20 expert panelists ranked recognizing the importance of athletic identity as essential for practitioners. The one expert on the panel who did not rank this competency as essential ranked the competency statement as useful (Ward et al., 2005). Athletic identity may be viewed on a similar level

of importance as race, gender, and other identities (Ward et al., 2005). With the current limited view of athletic identity, practitioners are at a disadvantage for connecting with athletes as few studies have examined personal meanings of athletic identity taken from participant perspectives (e.g., Newton et al., in press).

A better understanding of such athletic self-perceptions can inform clinical work as well. For example, athletes can view themselves as representatives of their sport and programs (Newton et al, in press). Counselors and psychologists can benefit from such knowledge as it relates to hesitations to seek out counseling services and potential resistance in counseling (e.g., athletes may not want others on campus to see them going to counseling because they may feel it will represent their team negatively).

In sum, the current study aims to provide greater detail on the construct of athletic identity based on current student-athlete experiences. The framing of the RMMDI allows athletic identity to be further explored and understood within the multidimensional self and social context. Meanings of athletic identity can be explored explicitly and implicitly through positioning on the model and individual reflections on responses (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013). While the methodological approach in this investigation does not support generalizability of results, providing rich descriptions of the data allows readers to understand ways in which findings can relate to athletes in different situations (Tracy, 2010). Further, the investigation can be catalytic for future research to expand on the understandings of athletic identity in several populations. Studying athletic identity in collegiate student-athletes can bolster literature and inform professional practice in sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development.

## **Reflexivity Statement**

My interest in the current study formed over many years. I was introduced to the field of sport and exercise psychology in my undergraduate career through conversations with a sport psychologist. I had been involved in sport from childhood until my final years in college. My interest in sport and exercise psychology sparked a desire to study counseling. I became interested in helping others work toward positive change and aimed to study counseling to work with a wide range of client populations. After finishing my undergraduate career, I completed a master's degree in counseling. I went on to enroll in the current doctoral program in kinesiology, blending my passions in sport and exercise psychology and counseling. My interest in the topic of athletic identity is likely due to several factors including, but not limited to, my athletic background and my work in the fields of counseling and sport and exercise psychology. When I began reading about the topic of athletic identity, I was interested in examining how identity changed over time. The more I became familiar with the literature, the more I became interested in helping provide a deeper understanding of the construct. I recognized the usefulness of the AIMS but saw there was more work to be done to provide a clearer view of athletic identity.

With my athletic background and work in both sport and exercise psychology and counseling, I recognized that my perspective could lead to unique research questions that would be beneficial for different disciplines. For instance, when I saw the factors of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity, I wondered what other aspects were connected to athletic identity. Upon continued reading, I understood that when coming to these factors, the aims were to measure strength and exclusivity. With the guidance of my

advisors, I understood that if I wanted a more complete view regarding depth and meanings of athletic identity, I should ask an appropriate question and investigate.

I believed this study to be worthy of attention for several reasons. Although I recognized that there were deeper meanings of athletic identity to be explored, that did not mean that others would have a similar perspective. I understood that not everyone who works with athletes has a background in sports. From experiences such as conversations with counselors and presentations with other students, I could see how this topic could be foreign to those with less experience in sport. To use a metaphor from my pilot work on this topic, athletic identity can be viewed as an iceberg to describe the existence of surface-level understandings as well as deeper understandings of what it means to be an athlete. Individuals who have less experience in sport may see the tip of the iceberg described in the literature and surmise that this constitutes the whole structure. I recognized that for counselors, sport psychology consultants, researchers, and student-athlete personnel, the proposed investigation could provide great insights.

In addition to realizing that the investigation could be helpful for those with less experience in sport, I also recognized that this study could be just as helpful for individuals who have a substantial amount of experience in sport. Individuals with less experience may be more open to learning new information while those with more experience may erroneously assume that their experiences speak for that of others. As an example, some former athletes may have seen the extremes of athletic cultures and can assume that such experiences constitute the norm. In turn, I aimed to describe the accounts, perspectives, and representations of identity from several athletes. In this way,

individuals can read and understand the experiences and perspectives of others. With the inductive approach and rich descriptions from the data, I aimed to present more detailed understandings of athletic identity taken from participant perspectives.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this investigation was to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context. The review of literature includes an overview on self-perceptions in sport before detailing identity theories which have been used to underpin understandings in athletic identity research. Following, the literature review expands on current understandings of athletic identity research before addressing the need to examine meanings of athletic identity from the view of collegiate student-athletes. Lastly, the review describes the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) as positioned within college student development literature (Jones & Abes, 2013). The RMMDI is a conceptual framework that both fits with understandings of identity theories and helps expand the understandings of athletic identity based on individual athlete perspectives.

#### **Self-Perceptions in Sport**

Self-perception research is an active area of study in the field of sport and exercise psychology (e.g., self-concept, self-efficacy, and identity). Self-perceptions are defined as individuals' cognitions, emotions, and attitudes directed toward themselves (Gill et al., 2017). Such perceptions pertain to both the overall holistic self and to view of the self in specific areas (e.g., self-schemata, self-efficacy; Markus, 1977, Bandura, 1977). Self-concept describes the overall perception of the self, which is conceptualized

as a complex and multifaceted construct impacted by influences in several domains (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Burke & Stets, 2009; Gill et al., 2017). The self-concept is comprised of different identities that interact and overlap in the multidimensional self. Identity theories give specific attention to identities within the holistic self-concept and provide a grounding for understanding identities described in sport and exercise psychology literature.

### **Identity Theories**

The current investigation is informed by identity theory and social identity theory. These theories have different origins but contain considerable overlap in understandings where each theory complements the other (Stets & Burke, 2000). According to identity theory, individuals engage in behaviors that reinforce and verify their identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As multidimensional beings, different roles and related identities develop and are organized into the holistic self (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Identities are conceptualized as situated in a hierarchy where salient identities drive role performance and have stability across time and situations (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The concept of commitment is an essential factor in identity theory. Commitment describes the degree to which an individual's interpersonal relationships in a network depend on the possession of a particular role. Stryker and Burke (2000) explain that commitment directly impacts salience and that salience influences role performance. Additionally, social context impacts role salience in the mutually validating relationship between identities and behaviors (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). From an identity theory perspective, individuals who identify with the role of athlete will engage



in actions that confirm their identities. Thus, this theory provides a rationale for understanding a range of actions from routine athletic behaviors (e.g., training, connecting with other athletes) to maladaptive behaviors (e.g., disordered eating, overtraining).

Social identity theory also provides a framework for better understanding identity research in sport and exercise psychology. Stets and Burke (2000) explain notable similarities between identity theory and social identity theory as each posit that many identities are comprised in the multidimensional self and influence behaviors. The differences between the two theories relate to differences in emphases more than to contradictions in perspectives (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory focuses more on intergroup relations and categories, while identity theory emphasizes identification with social roles (i.e., who an individual is versus what an individual does; Stets & Burke, 2000). In social identity theory, salience refers to activation of an identity in a situation, while in identity theory, salience describes the probability that an identity will be activated. While salience is viewed in different ways, both theories recognize the fit of the identity in the particular situation as a factor influencing identity salience (Stets & Burke, 2000). Further, social identity theory includes a cognitive process called depersonalization where the self is viewed as the embodiment of norms associated with a social category. Thus, the individual can perceive norms associated with the in-group and act consistently with such norms (Stets & Burke, 2000). In identity theory, self-verification is similar to depersonalization from social identity theory. Self-verification is a cognitive process where an individual can recognize the norms related to a role and act

in accordance with the behaviors associated with the role (Stets & Burke, 2000). More specifically, individuals have identity standards (e.g., set of meanings for being an athlete) and continually adjust to work towards congruence with identity standards (e.g., engaging in behavior that matches personal athletic identity standards; Burke & Stets, 2009). Thus, while the origins and semantics in social identity theory and identity theory have differences, there are notable similarities and ways in which both theories complement the other.

These identity theories include critical information pertaining to the current investigation. Concepts described in these theories have integral connections with the RMMDI conceptual framework discussed later in this literature review (e.g., identity as related to in-group categorization and role performance; matters related to identity salience; Jones & Abes, 2013). Further, the information from these identity theories provides a theoretical underpinning for understanding athletic identity research conducted in sport and exercise psychology.

### **Athletic Identity**

Brewer et al. (1993) define athletic identity as the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of athlete. Athletic identity is conceptualized both as a self-schema and a social role. According to Markus (1977), self-schemata are self-generalizations that guide the processing of information related to individual experiences. Thus, an individual with an athletic self-schema can interpret everyday events (e.g. eating, training) and unexpected events (e.g. illness, injury) in relation to the impact on athletic performance (Brewer et al., 1993; Markus, 1977).

### **Athletic Identity: Self-Schema Conceptualization**

While few studies explicitly discuss self-schemata and influences on athletic behavior, researchers can draw these connections from the literature. For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Chapman and Woodman (2016) concluded that male wrestlers reported a higher incidence of disordered eating in comparison to non-athlete controls. The researchers suggested that the results likely reflect the wrestlers' desire to gain muscle mass and decrease body fat; wrestlers face pressure to reach ideal weight classes that may be lower than their natural weights (Chapman & Woodman, 2016). Consistent with the understandings of self-schemata, the results in the meta-analysis may reflect differences in a wrestling self-schema, where diet decisions are strict, and a non-athlete self-schema, where diet decisions are more flexible. Additionally, self-schemata can influence the way in which athletes train their bodies. In a study using visual methodologies, Cherrington and Watson (2010) explain that a key takeaway in video diaries from a college basketball team was that players consistently trained to gain mass and strength to improve their athletic performance. From an athlete self-schema, the purpose of training can be sport-specific and performance-oriented. In contrast, the purpose of exercise for non-athletes may be driven by other factors such as health benefits and social interactions.

### **Athletic Identity: Social Role Conceptualization**

The conceptualization of athletic identity as a social role explains that self-identification is influenced by social factors and experiences such as the appraisal of other individuals and group membership. Grove, Fish, and Eklund (2004) tracked

changes in athletic identity following team selections for women's state all-star teams in basketball, field hockey, and volleyball. Results indicate that athletic identities of individuals who were not selected for the teams were significantly lower two weeks after the selection announcements (Grove et al., 2004). The study supports that social factors such as recognition and validation are integral in influencing athletic identity. Further, in a study on marathon runners, Horton and Mack (2000) reported that participants with higher athletic identities had expanded their social networks as a result of training. However, the previous social networks received less time and attention due to the increase in time spent in the athletic environment. These results support the connection between athletic identity and social relatedness to others involved in sport. Thus, literature supports the presence of external factors (e.g. social validation) and internal factors (e.g. self-schemata; processing of information) in the conceptualization of athletic identity.

### **Measurement of Athletic Identity**

Athletic identity has been commonly measured with the use of survey approaches including the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), the Athletic Identity Questionnaire (AIQ), and the Public-Private Athletic Identity Scale (PPAIS; Anderson, 2004; Brewer et al., 1993; Nasco & Webb, 2006). In comparison to the AIMS, the AIQ assesses broader aspects of identity related to sport, exercise, and physical activity, and the PPAIS measures personal and public aspects of identity related to athletic involvement (Anderson, 2004; Nasco & Webb, 2006). While other instruments have been developed, the AIMS remains the most widely used measure of athletic identity

(Ronkainen et al., 2016a). Brewer et al.'s (1993) seminal athletic identity work provided initial validation for the AIMS. The initial AIMS was comprised of 10 items scored on a seven-point Likert scale; further research led to the revised seven-item AIMS which assesses the dimensions of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). In addition to psychometric testing, cultural validity assessments have strengthened the AIMS as the primary instrument used to measure athletic identity (e.g. Visek, Hurst, Maxwell, & Watson, 2008; Priois, 2012).

Over the years, scholars have used the AIMS to operationalize athletic identities in order to assess relationships and associations between athletic identity and several variables, such as athletic satisfaction, athletic commitment, life satisfaction, and the maintenance of physical activity after athletics (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012; Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014; Reifsteck, Gill, & Labban, 2016). The potential for both positive and negative outcomes corresponding with salient athletic identities provides the rationale for Brewer et al.'s (1993) original description of athletic identity as both "Hercules' muscle" and "Achilles' heel."

### **Athletic Identity: Proposed Benefits**

Potential benefits related to salient athletic identities are increased confidence, enhanced physical capabilities, increased social interactions, improved self-esteem, enhanced body image, increased athletic motivation and satisfaction, and decreased anxiety (Brewer et al., 1993; Burns et al., 2012; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Specifically, Burns et al. (2012) assessed athletic identity and athletic satisfaction in a sample of 229 college athletes by using the AIMS and the Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ).

The results of the study showed differences in athletic satisfaction across the factors of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity. Social identity and negative affectivity were positively correlated with athletic satisfaction, while exclusivity was negatively correlated with satisfaction (Burns et al., 2012). The study supports an association between athletic satisfaction and commitment to success in the athlete role.

Horton and Mack's (2000) findings also support the presence of positive aspects related to high athletic identities. Participants included 236 runners who completed surveys assessing athletic identity, life roles, social networks, training effects, and sport commitment. In addition to the increased social connections, marathon runners with high athletic identities had enhanced performances and increased commitment to running. Further, athletic identity was associated with decreased anxiety, enhanced body image, and increased confidence (Horton & Mack, 2000).

### **Athletic Identity: Proposed Consequences**

Potential negative aspects related to high athletic identities include identity foreclosure, or over identification with sport, career maturity concerns, post-retirement anxiety symptoms, self-ageing concerns, disordered eating, substance use concerns, excessive training for sport, experiences of burnout, and social isolation (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Brewer et al., 1993; Burns et al., 2012; Giannone et al., 2017; Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2016). In a recent systematic review, Brewer and Petitpas (2017) discussed the issue of athletic identity foreclosure which describes strong attachment to the athlete role before having meaningfully explored other options. This concept is similar to exclusive athletic identity as the role of athlete is overemphasized

and can hinder holistic development. Potential consequences of identity foreclosure include substance use, burnout, and difficulties adjusting to life apart from sport (e.g., injury, career exploration; Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Similarly, in addition to the positive outcomes detailed in the previous section, Burns et al. (2012) found a negative association between athletic satisfaction and sole identification with the role of athlete, providing additional support for the negative aspects connected to exclusive athletic identities.

Further, Giannone et al. (2017) discuss potential detrimental aspects associated with salient athletic identities. Giannone et al. (2017) assessed the influence of athletic identity on anxiety and depressive symptoms in college players three months after the end of their final season. A total of 72 athletes completed the AIMS, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D). Results indicated that after controlling for pre-retirement anxiety, athletic identity significantly predicted anxiety symptoms after sport. Also, results on depressive symptoms followed a similar, though non-significant, pattern. Thus, athletes with salient athletic identities may experience mental health concerns after transitioning from sport. In addition to proactive planning and programming for transitions from sport (e.g., Reifsteck, Brooks, Newton, & Shriver, 2019), it is important to better understand complexities of athletic identity, the construct tied to such outcomes. Such information can provide further details underlying these potential negative outcomes as well as the positive outcomes connected with athletic identity.

### **Diverse Methodologies in Athletic Identity Literature**

While many studies examining athletic identity take survey approaches, more recently, researchers have assessed athletic identity with the use of different methodologies. Stephan and Brewer (2007) studied factors that contribute to the maintenance of athletic identity for elite athletes using a qualitative approach. Both personal (e.g., physical aspects) and social factors (e.g., recognition from others) are discussed in relation to athletic identity. These two categories were found using hierarchical content analysis and were described as interconnected aspects contributing to the maintenance of athletic identity (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Further, Cherrington and Watson (2010) examined the lifestyle and routines of athletes by using visual methodologies. Findings pertain to relevant aspects of the athletic experience for the college basketball players in the study: athletic schedules can be monotonous; the importance of a performance identity varies among athletes; and physical training is vital for transforming the body to meet athletic goals (Cherrington & Watson, 2010).

In addition to the experiences of athletes and maintenance of athletic identity, researchers have examined athletic identity in the transition from sport, as well as with sport-specific concerns (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005; Lally, 2007). Brown and Potrac (2009) used an interpretative approach to understand the stories of elite soccer players who were deselected from their teams. The researchers explain that the transition from sport can be a difficult time where athletes can face maladaptive psychological concerns when their athletic identities are challenged. In the study, athletes who were deselected from an elite soccer club felt anger, sadness,



shame, confusion, and that their goals had been taken from them (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Similarly, Lally (2007) examined the transition from athletics by conducting interviews with collegiate student-athletes at three time points: the beginning of their final season, one month after the end of the season, and approximately one year after the end of the season. Lally (2007) observed that the five collegiate athletes who were proactive in using coping strategies and redefining their self-concepts fared more favorably than the student-athlete who held to his athletic identity after retiring from sport. Further, studies on athletic identity that have used diverse methodologies have focused on common concerns in athletics by conducting in-depth analyses on cases. Jones et al. (2005) used an interpretive approach to assess the story and experiences of an elite swimmer whose career was interrupted and ultimately ended due to disordered eating. The researchers explored how certain factors common in sports likely interacted and resulted in problematic occurrences: perfectionistic tendencies, coaching influences, disordered eating, and an exclusive athletic identity (Jones et al., 2005). These studies give in-depth information that provide greater contextual understandings to studies with similar findings using survey approaches (e.g., Chapman & Woodman, 2016; Giannone et al., 2017).

In addition, Carless and Douglas' line of research on cultural scripts in athletics provide substantive information on common narratives that influence athletic identity (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a; Carless & Douglas, 2013b). Douglas and Carless (2006) explain that the dominant narrative in sport culture reflects the emphasis on performance, winning, and achievement (i.e., performance narrative).

The researchers conducted interviews with seven professional women golfers to explore potential narratives characteristic of the women's experiences in sport. In addition to the dominant performance narrative, content and structural analyses resulted in the emergence of two alternative narratives: discovery and relational (Douglas and Carless, 2006). In discovery narratives, athletics can provide opportunities (e.g., travel opportunities, financial incentives), and in relational narratives, interpersonal relationships are the most salient reasons for involvement in sport (Douglas & Carless, 2006).

Carless and Douglas (2013a; 2013b) used narrative methodology in subsequent studies to explore the life stories of elite athletes and the cultural scripts that influence identity development. In their research, Carless and Douglas suggest that athletes can achieve success in sport without attaching to the performance narrative where winning and accomplishments drive athletic involvement. Findings support that some athletes adopt values reflective of performance narratives while others resist these values. Additionally, some athletes take a public persona where these values are accepted as vital, but have private views that differ from the performance emphasis (Carless & Douglas, 2013b). Thus, while performance narratives are prevalent in sport, and can influence athletic identities, there are alternative narratives that exist where athletes can work toward and achieve athletic success.

While diverse approaches have been included in the literature in recent years, more research is needed to examine personal meanings that athletes attribute to their experiences (Ronkainen et al., 2016b). Studies have focused on in-depth investigations on

topics related to athletic identity (e.g., transitions; disordered eating; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones et al., 2005; Lally, 2007). Also, studies have started to examine external influences impacting athletic identity (e.g., cultural scripts, performance narrative; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a; Carless & Douglas, 2013b). However, little to no research has examined the meanings of athletic identity that are ascribed to the construct by those who have lived experiences with the role. Researchers must explore the agency and ownership that athletes have in their experiences. It is important to take more direct approaches to better understand how athletes perceive and make sense of their identities. Such an investigation is of great importance for college student-athletes, a population that faces unique challenges in their role.

### **Student-Athlete Identity Literature**

An examination of the meanings of athletic identity taken from participant perspectives can add vital information to the understanding of the construct. Further, a clearer conceptualization of athletic identity is of particular importance as it pertains to the collegiate student-athlete population. While some researchers have used inductive approaches to examine athletic identity in this population (e.g., video diaries of lifestyle, athletic transitions; Cherrington & Watson, 2010; Lally, 2007), little to no research has been conducted to assess the meanings of athletic identity from participant perspectives, especially using a framework examining the construct within the multidimensional self and the social context. Findings from such a study are relevant to fields ranging from sport and exercise psychology to student development and counseling studies. College years are often recognized as a critical period for growth and transformation for college

students. Literature supports that college students are challenged to grow in many ways related to personal development, relational maturity, and professional advancement (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Student-athletes are tasked with overcoming the challenges common to others in the student body but face additional responsibilities connected with the athlete role. In addition to the student role, the athlete role can be physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. For these reasons pertaining to the balance of at least two demanding roles, student-athletes are considered a special population on college campuses (Lippincott & Lippincott, 2007).

The study of athletic identity in student-athletes is important for professionals who work with this population. Student development literature supports the need to better understand athletic identity in student-athletes and also provides grounding for better understanding the construct (Lippincott & Lippincott, 2007). Before discussing the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI), a framework in which athletic identity can be positioned within the holistic self, it is important to discuss the literature that preceded the model (Jones & Abes, 2013). Additionally, theories taken from developmental psychology provide framing for some identity studies in sport and exercise psychology (Ronkainen et al., 2016a).

### **Student Development Identity Literature**

The conceptualization of college student identity has evolved over the decades in student development literature. The study of identity is essential for understanding college students' experiences and the interaction between students and the collegiate context (Jones & Abes, 2013). The conceptualization of college student identity can be

understood as a process of evolution where theories have changed due to groundings in differing theoretical frameworks across paradigms. In this process of evolution, the understanding of college student identity has changed from a focus on maturation across stages to an emphasis on dynamic representations of the self in social contexts.

### **Foundational Conceptualizations of Identity in Developmental Psychology**

Initial theories (e.g., Erikson's stages of psychosocial development) providing grounding to understand college student identity reflect positivist paradigmatic perspectives. The theories are largely psychologically based and reflect sequential, stage-based approaches detailing identity development. Also, consistent with positivism, these models aim to explain the reality of development (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Understandings of college student identity have roots in Erikson's conceptualization of development due to the psychosocial elements of the theory. Erikson's work proposes that psychological processes direct development and that maturation is also influenced by the context (Jones & Abes, 2013). Consistent with positivism, Erikson theorized that psychosocial development followed the epigenetic principle where aspects of identity grow and unfold according to an inherent plan or principle consistent across individuals (Erikson, 1968). Due to the biological basis of this process, the focus on development emphasized internal processes rather than social influences. Further, Erikson proposed that psychosocial development consisted of eight stages with age-related developmental tasks to be resolved over the course of a lifetime: trust versus mistrust; autonomy versus shame and doubt; initiative versus guilt; industry versus inferiority; identity versus identity confusion; intimacy versus isolation;

generativity versus stagnation; and integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1994). Task resolution in one stage enables successful completion of the next stage. Proper progression through such stages (e.g., developing trust, autonomy) results in a healthy personality which is characterized by accurate self-perceptions, clear perceptions of the world, unity of personality, and mastery of the environment (Erikson, 1968).

Erikson's fifth stage of identity versus identity confusion has been influential in college student identity literature as the stage overlaps with traditionally-aged college students (Jones & Abes, 2013). Thus, from a positivist lens, the developmental task holds centrality for college students. Specifically, resolving this developmental task involves finding individual clarity on values, relationships, and career decisions. Further, this stage of discovering identity represents the shift from childhood to adulthood (Erikson, 1994; Jones & Abes, 2013).

### **Foundational Conceptualizations of Identity in College Student Development**

Learning from Erikson, different scholars examined choices and tasks faced by college students in different stages of development (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Erikson's work considered development across the life span, but Chickering theorized about development specific to college students, particularly building upon Erikson's (1994) identity versus identity confusion stage. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model displays seven vectors of development faced by college students: developing competence; managing emotions; moving through autonomy to interdependence; developing mature interpersonal relationships; establishing identity; developing integrity; and developing purpose. The vectors represent central concerns for students to resolve;

progressing through the tasks results in continued development. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) fifth vector of establishing identity involves gaining clarity with the self-concept and integrating internal and external views. While this fifth vector is more specific to identity formation, each of the vectors relate to identity development (Jones & Abes, 2013). Similar to Erikson's stage-based approach, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model emphasizes developmental tasks to be resolved. While the tasks are not necessarily linear, it is theorized that linear completion is optimal as vectors build on one another (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Erikson's (1994) stages of psychosocial development and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model show the grounding in developmental psychology and the sequential nature characteristic of these foundational theories for student development literature. Identity development is theorized as a stage-based process where individuals mature through resolving developmental tasks across the respective stages. Subsequent theories bring attention to social identities and consider differences across group membership and roles which were not addressed in the aforementioned stage-based approaches.

More recent theories and models focus more on multiple social identities, and while there are stage-based models of development (e.g., racial identity development models) that reflect positivist influences, these theories make constructivist claims (Jones & Abes, 2013). The essential features of such theories reflect sociological influences: beliefs that individuals have multiple social identities, views of identities as dynamic rather than static, and claims that identities are socially constructed. More specifically,

sense of self and social identities are viewed as the products of interactions between individuals and the broader social context including historical processes, norms, and expectations (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). In turn, research on college student identity takes into account the meanings of identity attributed by college students (Abes et al., 2007). These understandings allow for holistic representations of individuals within the larger environment, which is more consistent with constructivist views of a dynamic world.

### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)**

The original Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) and the more recent re-conceptualized version (RMMDI) show identity as a construct that is dynamic, holistic, and complex (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). These models were formed through qualitative investigations in which college students discussed ways in which they came to understand their identities (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). From a study positioned in grounded theory, the original MMDI emerged from the investigation (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The MMDI offers a conceptual framework consisting of these main components: core, social identities, identity salience, and the contextual influences (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Specifically, the core represents the personal identity and is located in the center of the model. The core is surrounded by multiple rings representing social identities; the position of the dot on the ring represents the salience of the social identity (i.e., dots on the rings that are situated closer to the core represent more salient social identities). The core and orbiting social identities are



influenced by the larger context which includes aspects of family, socioeconomic, cultural, and daily influences on identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Several features of the MMDI and RMMDI display a transition from the preceding theories in student development literature. These models were formed from qualitative investigations where college students described their identities (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation; Jones & Abes, 2013). Thus, the elements of these models are based in participants' personal meanings and self-views; researchers grounded their approach in constructivism (Jones & Abes, 2013). The models display a distinction between the personal identity and social identities. Personal identity consists of individual characteristics (e.g., intelligent, kind) while social identities are categorized by group membership (e.g., race, class; Deaux, 1993; Torres et al., 2009).

### **Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI)**

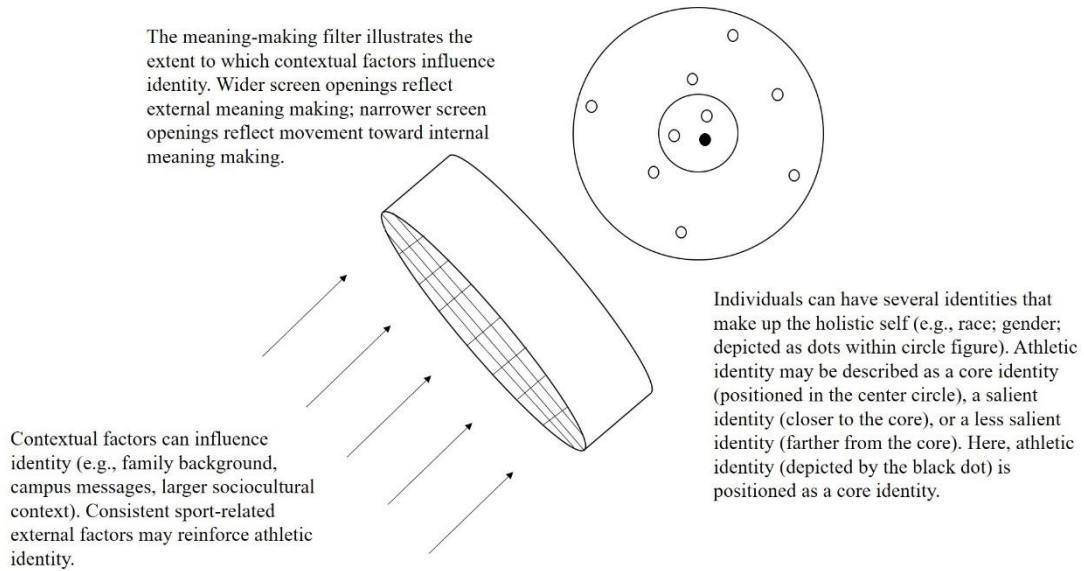
While the MMDI and RMMDI have common elements such as distinguishing between personal and social identities, the major addition in the RMMDI is the meaning-making filter (see Figure 1 for adapted RMMDI-inspired diagram for athletes; Jones & Abes, 2013). More specifically, the meaning-making filter describes a set of assumptions explaining how individuals organize their lives and self-views (Abes et al., 2007). The meaning-making filter is illustrated as a screen influencing the extent to which contextual influences impact the personal and social identities. Wider screen openings reflect external meaning making where contextual influences have a greater impact on self-views. Narrower screen openings reflect movement toward self-authorship where contextual influences impacting identity are present, but individuals are able to take more

ownership of identity choices (Abes et al., 2007). For example, college students operating from external meaning making perspectives may define themselves based strongly on family background, stereotypes, and their current context. College students taking viewpoints of self-authorship may recognize these contextual influences but take more ownership in how the external factors will impact their respective self-views.

The MMIDI and RMMIDI display the complexities, interconnections, and dynamic nature of identity. The RMMIDI adds the meaning-making filter which influences the extent to which external factors impact self-perceptions (Jones & Abes, 2013). This added feature in the RMMIDI brings additional attention to the complex interaction of identity and social influences (e.g., socialization processes influencing meaning making). The models bring attention to multiple social identities and depict identities as dynamic rather than static.

*Figure 1*

*RMMDI-Inspired Diagram for Athletes*



*Note:* Adapted from Identity development of college students: Advancing frameworks for multiple dimensions of identity (pp. 54, 105), by S.R. Jones and E. S. Abes, 2013, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2013 by Jossey Bass.

**Athletic Identity Situated in RMMDI Conceptual Framework**

The understandings of college student identity taken from student development research provide grounding for studying athletic identity in collegiate student-athletes. The RMMDI provides a conceptual framework for better understanding the construct of athletic identity due to the emphasis on participant views regarding the holistic self within the social context (Jones & Abes, 2013). Further detailing understandings of athletic identity provides the rationale for studying this construct as positioned within the RMMDI framework.

The most commonly mentioned features of athletic identity have been referenced since the seminal athletic identity work (Brewer et al., 1993). These elements of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity are central in athletic identity literature (Ronkainen et al., 2016a). Subsequent research has described features of athletic identity that extend the understanding of the construct. Nasco and Webb's (2006) work emphasizes the distinction of private and public aspects of athletic identity. The private identity refers to the extent individuals internalize the athlete role for themselves while the public aspect describes athletic role assignment by others (Nasco & Webb, 2006).

Public and private features are also evident in Stephan and Brewer's (2007) work where social (e.g., recognition of others) and personal factors (e.g., physical training) are described as themes connected to the maintenance of athletic identity. In addition to receiving recognition from the public, student-athletes may feel that they are representatives of their teams and programs (Newton et al., in press). This understanding can result in pride associated with representing a program but also pressure to be an exceptional representative of the program. Further, through long journeys of athletic involvement, student-athletes may feel that the role is a central part of the self which is supported by the entangling of athletic identity and personality traits where the two become difficult to separate (Newton et al., in press). In sum, the three-factor model (social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity), public and private distinctions, and findings from pilot work support the conceptualization of athletic identity as a multifaceted construct. These features are more clearly understood and depicted within the RMMDI framework.

Several elements of the RMMDI display the appropriate fit as well as the benefits of investigating athletic identity from such groundings. The differences between personal identity and social identities in student development literature (Abes et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2009) could be compared to the distinction in private and public identities in athletic identity research (Nasco & Webb, 2006). Identity salience is a critical concept<sup>1</sup> evident in psychological identity theories and the RMMDI framework (Jones & Abes, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Such elements of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity can all be influenced by the salience of the athlete role (e.g., theoretically, high levels of exclusivity would correspond with high role salience for the athletic role and low salience for all other roles). In addition to the discussion of related concepts in athletic identity studies and RMMDI literature, ways in which athletic identity could fit structurally within the RMMDI are discussed in the next section.

### **Potential Structural Layouts Depicting Athletic Identity in RMMDI**

Due to the RMMDI's transferability, the model can be adapted to better understand athletic identity in college student-athletes. Specifically, the structural layout of the RMMDI could remain, but the key dimensions of the model (i.e., core, social identities, identity salience, and contextual factors; Jones & Abes, 2013) could reflect dimensions of identity present for college student-athletes. While the aspects of the model would not change, based on the previous literature, the responses and reflections

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<sup>1</sup> The definitions of identity salience are slightly different in the RMMDI and in identity theories (i.e., identity theory and social identity theory; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity salience within the RMMDI describes important identities that stand out to individuals; salience is depicted by the proximity of the identity to the core of the model (Jones & Abes, 2013). This conceptualization of identity salience as described in the RMMDI is used throughout the dissertation.

of participants could potentially reflect the following dimensions: athletic identity as part of the core, a salient athletic social identity, and external factors reinforcing athletic identity. While student-athletes can experience athletic identity differently, the adjustments to the dimensions of the core, social identities, and contextual factors could potentially reflect commonalities in experiences.

The personal identity displayed in the core could reflect dimensions of identity for student-athletes. In the original MMDI conceptualization, the personal identity and social identities were viewed as distinct categories; the former described personal attributes and the latter referred to group membership and social roles (Abes et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2009). In further studies, some participants placed roles that were originally categorized as social identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation) into the core identity category. The reasoning for the shift was that some participants viewed the roles as fully incorporated into their identity while others recognized that external influences could impact the core (Abes et al., 2007).

Athletic identity may be included in the core, personal identity for several reasons. Even if social roles were inflexibly excluded from the core, aspects of athletic identity could become incorporated into the core identity. The core category includes personal characteristics and attributes that can describe individuals (Torres et al., 2009). Thus, common traits of athletes could be situated in the core identity (e.g., athletic, mentally tough). Additionally, research supports the conceptualization of a public as well as a private athletic identity where the athlete role is internalized by athletes (Nasco &

Webb, 2006). Thus, athletic identity has unique aspects that could position the identity as both part of the core and as a social identity orbiting the core.

Research supports the conceptualization of the athlete role as a social identity. In the original MMIDI, the social identity dimension includes multiple identities marked by membership in social groups (Torres et al., 2009). Athletic identity has been conceptualized as a social identity where athletes recognize the social role and as a public identity where role placement is assigned by others (Brewer et al., 1993; Nasco & Webb, 2006). In this social role, athletes may feel the pressures of living and performing in the public arena. These expectations can influence the salience of the athlete role as athletes are tasked with representing their sport. Additionally, as the conceptual models include multiple identities, the models can present a comprehensive view of individuals. Multiple intersecting identities can be explored and further examined with such a model. For example, a black male football player may feel that identities are reinforced in the sport domain while a black male swimmer may have far different experiences in his environment. These identities are more clearly understood through participant reflections including discussions of identities, salience, contextual factors, and socialization.

Athletic role saliency can be impacted by both internal and external processes. Identity theories support that consistently striving to meet personal goals and maintaining connections to social networks where athletic involvement is reinforced can increase identity salience (Stets & Burke, 2000). Therefore, for many athletes the social role may be displayed as closely orbiting the core identity, representing high salience. Further, pairing high salience of the athletic role with low salience in other social roles is

described as exclusivity. Solely identifying with the athletic role and dismissing the exploration of other social roles can have detrimental impacts on holistic development (Beamon, 2012; Brewer et al., 1993). The presence of exclusivity can be displayed by assessing the dimensions of the conceptual framework. Specifically in the RMMDI, exclusivity can be represented by an athlete role positioned closely to the core while other roles are positioned far from the core identity.

While the athlete role can be an essential role for student-athletes, other social roles hold importance. Student-athletes are tasked with balancing student and athletic roles. Ideally, both the student and athlete roles are fostered, but this balance may depend on the individual and multiple contextual factors (e.g., peers, program values). Further, several other social roles orbit the core identity and can have varying saliences depending on multiple factors. In the RMMDI, the importance of such social roles (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class; Jones & Abes, 2013) depends on individual attribution.

Contextual factors can impact the understanding and expression of athletic identity in several ways. Pertaining to student-athletes, the campus climate and larger context can influence personal and social identities. The daily experiences of training as well as relationships with those who support the athlete role can all foster athletic identity (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Further, broader external factors such as family background, community influence, and the larger sociocultural context can impact the expression and understanding of athletic identity in student-athletes. Family, team, and community appraisal can play an integral role in the instillation of athletic identity over the years



(Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010). Thus, athletic identity is a self-perception that is not only fostered personally, but is socially reinforced by family, teammates, and coaches during athletic involvement. Athletic identity is also unique in that those who do not have personal connections with the athletes can reinforce the identity. As a public identity (Nasco & Webb, 2006), athletic identity is reinforced by fan and community support.

The multiple dimensions from the RMMDI can be adapted to depict ways in which athletic identity is positioned within the holistic self for student-athletes. While elements of the RMMDI remain consistent, adapting the dimensions of the core, social identities, identity salience, and contextual factors may reflect important features of athletic identity. Based on understandings in the literature, using the RMMDI framing with student-athletes may reflect the following dimensions: athletic identity as part of the core, a salient athletic social identity, and external factors reinforcing athletic identity. While the literature supports such claims, the current investigation provided current student-athletes with the opportunity to use the model to reflect on their self-perceptions. By examining the meanings of athletic identity from student-athlete perspectives, and allowing participants to position their identities within the holistic self and social context, the investigation presents a more complex understanding of the construct of athletic identity.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

The purpose of this investigation was to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context. The present investigation was guided and organized within the conceptual framework of the RMMDI (Abes et al., 2007). Before discussing the paradigmatic assumptions, methodology, and methods of the current investigation, it is necessary to review the research design and contributions of recent pilot work. Thus, the following section will focus on the pilot study before transitioning to descriptions of the current investigation.

#### **Pilot Study**

The aims of the pilot study (Newton et al., in press) were to understand the meaning of athletic identity taken from the view of collegiate student-athletes and to inform the direction of the current investigation. Participants included nine Division I student-athletes across several sports who completed individual semi-structured interviews. Participants in the study described athletic identity as a personal part of their self-concept that has been tested, reinforced, and strengthened both through commitment to the role as well as consistency throughout the athletic journey. Additionally, athletic identity was described as a complement to personality where sport-related traits are magnified and non-sport behaviors are minimized. Further, athletes discussed being a representative of their programs and teams as a part of athletic identity and seemed to

carry themselves with this knowledge. Athletic identity was also described as a role influenced by self-appraisal and social appraisal (Newton et al., in press). These findings from the pilot study informed directions for the current investigation in several ways, particularly in moving toward utilizing a framework that depicts the multidimensional self within the context. In addition, the interview guide and data collection protocol were both refined to align with the RMMDI framing (Jones & Abes, 2013). Notably, the point of the current investigation was not to deductively fit the participant responses into predetermined themes from the pilot study. However, the pilot investigation findings display how such understandings could fit within the RMMDI, supporting the use of the model in the present study.

### **Current Investigation**

The current investigation assessed athletic identity within the framework of the RMMDI. The research question in this investigation follows: What are the meanings of athletic identity taken from the view of student-athletes participating in team sports at Division I universities? The RMMDI provides a model for better understanding the complexities of individual identities as personal identities, social identities, and identity salience are all represented on the model within the greater context that influences identity (Abes et al., 2007). Athletic identity was assessed based on the ways in which this self-identity fits within the holistic self and related social context. To work toward goals of examining meanings of athletic identity within this framework, it is necessary to utilize approaches that assess the complexity of understandings that emerge from the use of the model (i.e., positioning within RMMDI-inspired model; reflections and

interpretations of positioning). Further, in order to work toward the aims of deepening the understanding of athletic identity, it is necessary to use appropriate methodologies that assess depth and meaning. Both the conceptual groundings and methodological considerations support the use of a qualitative approach in the current study. More specifically, the current investigation used an inductive, bottom-up approach framed by a constructivist epistemology to explore the meaning of athletic identity taken from current student-athlete perspectives.

### **Paradigmatic Assumptions and Methodological Transparency**

Consistent with justifications detailed by Wiltshire (2018), the current study was positioned in critical realism, pairing ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, 2012). Wiltshire (2018) explains the issue of epistemic fallacy, where scholars erroneously collapse questions regarding ontology and epistemology. Ontological perspectives pertain to views on the nature of reality and the concept of being while epistemological views pertain to ways in which individuals gain knowledge on what exists (Maxwell, 2012). From a critical realist paradigmatic lens, systematic investigations are recognized as fallible as methods provide imperfect understandings of research topics. Wiltshire (2018) explains that these points are epistemological and not ontological; recognizing the separation of the two allows for the pairing of a realist ontology and constructivist epistemology. In critical realism, researchers aspire to find evidence of real phenomena while accepting that individuals understand the world through constructing meaning based on perceptions (Maxwell, 2012; Wiltshire, 2018). Additionally, Wiltshire (2018) explains judgmental rationality where production of

knowledge and theories can lead to satisfactory conclusions that are tentative in nature. Further, researchers argue that satisfactory conclusions emergent in investigations do not reflect multiple realities but present valid perspectives on reality (Maxwell, 2012; Wiltshire, 2018). In this investigation, the aspects of athletic identity based on participant accounts can describe satisfactory conclusions that point to the elusive meanings of the construct.

From a critical realist perspective, the aim of the investigation was to provide deeper understandings of athletic identity and such positioning within the holistic self and context based on student-athlete perspectives. Thus, with the grounding in epistemological constructivism and with an inductive approach, the goal was to allow participant responses to inform the discussion of meaning. Through this lens, individual meaning making is viewed as a product of social interactions, and self-identities are conceptualized as dynamic, multidimensional, and in constant interaction with the social context (Jones & Abes, 2013). Thus, to broaden the understanding of athletic identity in student-athletes, epistemological constructivism provides an ideal perspective for examining meaning from such perspectives.

The current investigation used a qualitative descriptive approach to work toward the research aims. Sandelowski (2010) contends that the value of qualitative descriptive research is evident in the knowledge produced in such studies rather than a focus on a strict classification of methods. Further, qualitative descriptive research contains methods that resist simple classification characteristic of other methodologies (e.g., phenomenology), but that are chosen deliberately and coherently for investigations (e.g.,

interviews, thematic analysis). Lambert and Lambert (2012) and Sandelowski (2010) discuss the value of qualitative descriptive methodology as a vehicle for studying and presenting data while accurately describing the research process and related decisions. Thus, the current investigation used a qualitative descriptive approach in order to work toward the goal of better understanding athletic identity. Consistent with the approach, specific methods were paired intentionally to work toward research aims and are described in sections below.

### Participants

Participants included twelve NCAA Division I student-athletes from three southeastern universities in the United States ( $n = 8$  women,  $n = 4$  men; age range 18-22;  $M_{age} = 20.4$  years; see Table 1 for participant demographic information). The participants identified as White American ( $n = 7$ ), Black/African American ( $n = 1$ ), Hispanic American ( $n = 1$ ), Asian and White American ( $n = 1$ ), British ( $n = 1$ ), and Spanish ( $n = 1$ ). Participants competed in soccer ( $n = 7$ ), softball ( $n = 4$ ), and basketball ( $n = 1$ ).

*Table 1. Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Year in College	Sport	Playing Status	Years Played
P1	21	Female	White American	Senior	Soccer	Former Starter, Injury	17
P2	21	Female	White American	Senior	Soccer	Starter	18
P3	20	Female	White American	Junior	Softball	Rotation Player	15

P4	19	Female	Hispanic American	Freshman	Softball	Rotation Player	13
P5	18	Female	African American	Freshman	Basketball	Rotation Player	9
P6	22	Male	British	Graduate	Soccer	Starter	16
P7	20	Male	White American	Redshirt Freshman	Soccer	Starter	15
P8	22	Female	White American	Graduate	Soccer	Rotation Player	18
P9	20	Male	White American	Sophomore	Soccer	Starter	15
P10	22	Male	Spanish	Graduate	Soccer	Starter	19
P11	20	Female	Asian/White American	Junior	Softball	Starter	13
P12	20	Female	White American	Junior	Softball	Starter	11

Participants were recruited from team sports from southeastern, mid-major<sup>2</sup> NCAA Division I universities. Student-athletes on team sports and individual sports may have different experiences related to socialization and current sport involvement with their teams in collegiate athletics. Thus, the focus of this investigation centered on team sports in which athletes compete along with other individuals (e.g., soccer) as opposed to individual sports where athletes compete independently (e.g., singles tennis). The team

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<sup>2</sup> Within Division I collegiate athletics, “Power 5” institutions are members of the five highest-earning conferences (Weight, Navarro, Smith-Ryan, & Huffman, 2016); “mid-major” is a term commonly used to describe institutions outside of the Power 5 conferences.

sports included in the study (i.e., soccer, basketball, and softball/baseball) were intentionally selected because they offered both men's and women's teams. Student-athletes at Division I universities may have different experiences and expectations (e.g., obligations, competition level) when compared to Division II and Division III student-athletes. Colleges and universities in this level have the largest athletic budgets and award the highest amount of athletic scholarships when compared to other divisions (NCAA, 2018). Division I athletics are considered the most elite level of collegiate sport involvement, which may result in potential differences in experiences among student-athletes across other divisions. The rationale for selecting Division I student-athletes participating in specific team sports at mid-major universities was to limit potential variability of a purely heterogeneous group; this narrowing allowed for more focused analysis. Within the mid-major Division I team sports that were selected, the inclusion of diverse student-athletes was a purposeful decision to allow for the examination of athletic identity in relation to different social identities central to the structure within the RMMDI framework (e.g., race, gender; see Appendix C). Thus, not only could the positioning of athletic identity be explored within the multidimensional self, but the reasons for the positioning could be reflected upon by the participants (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013).

### **Procedures**

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I sent study information to athletic staff at each institution who forwarded the recruitment email to student-athletes. A flyer was also used to aid in recruitment efforts. I corresponded with the student-athlete



participants via email and scheduled individual interviews with each participant.

Participants received a \$10 gift card after participation in the study if allowable by their institution.

Meetings took place on student-athlete campuses. Participant meetings consisted of review of study information sheets, a semi-structured interview, self-identity reflection through positioning identities on the RMMDI-inspired model<sup>3</sup>, and the completion of a demographic form (e.g., age, gender, primary sport; See Appendix A).

Interview questions assessed the meanings of athletic identity taken from the participant perspectives (see Appendix B). The first part of the interview guide was adapted from the pilot study for the current investigation. In pilot work (Newton et al., in press), the interview questions prompted discussion of the meanings of athletic identity and relevant athletic experiences, supporting their relevance in the current investigation. Additionally, findings from the pilot study connect with understandings of the RMMDI, further supporting the inclusion of similar prompts in the first section of the meetings in the current investigation. During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, follow-up probing questions, and used reflections throughout the interview to assess the understanding of initial interpretations.

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<sup>3</sup> Participants positioned identities within a circular model based on the MMPI. The name RMMDI is used here and throughout the dissertation because the study was guided and interpreted through the reconceptualized model. The RMMDI includes the MMPI structure, but includes additional elements of the meaning-making filter and the relationship between contextual influences and multiple identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). The name RMMDI is also used because MMPI representations can be superimposed into the RMMDI framework in the investigation to discuss the impact of contextual factors and meaning-making capacity.

After completing questions in the first section of the meeting, student-athletes engaged in a self-identity reflection activity through positioning identities on the RMMDI-inspired model (Abes et al., 2007). I asked participants to list identities that are central within their self-concept. I explained the conceptual model and participants were asked to situate identities within the RMMDI-inspired model (see Appendix C). Identity salience of the social identities was reflected by their positioning in relation to the core of the model. Further, student-athletes described contextual factors that influence their identities with the use of the RMMDI. Because meaning-making capacity is conceptualized as a process outside of participant awareness (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013), the discussion of this topic was further developed through interpretation and reflection with an independent coder in data analysis.

After student-athletes depicted their identities through the use of the model, participants reflected on the positioning of identities on the model. I used open-ended questions, follow-up probing questions, and reflections to elicit detailed responses from participants regarding views of their self-concept. Further, I asked participants follow-up questions regarding the contextual factors included in the model. Examples of questions include these follow up prompts: rationale for where athletic identity was positioned in model; connections between athletic identity and positioning of other identities; and ways in which contextual factors influence athletic identity (see Appendix C).

Meetings were audio recorded and the interviews lasted between 41 and 70 minutes (average length of 54 minutes). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. At the end of each interview, I used reflections to discuss standout information from the meeting and

received participant feedback on initial interpretations before the conclusion of the meetings. I wrote field notes after each interview in the research process (Patton, 2002). The study themes were sent to participants so that they were able to reflect and add feedback on findings (Tracy, 2010). The four participants who provided additional feedback on the summary information supported the study findings.

For qualitative inquiries, Patton (2002) explains that guidelines for appropriate sample sizes are dependent on the investigation. Patton (2002) argues that the meaningfulness of the data presented in such inquiries is based more on finding information rich cases and using proper data analysis than on the specific sample size. Similarly, Tracy (2010) explains that researchers must aspire to gather an amount of data that can support the presentation of substantive, meaningful claims on the research topic. Patton (2002) explains the concept of recruiting additional participants until the researcher sees that there is redundancy of findings. Based on pilot work (Newton et al., in press), where findings were provided from nine participants, the current investigation proposed that redundancy of responses could occur with 12 to 15 participants.

The emphasis on information rich cases and writing analytic memos on the process helped indicate when to conclude data collection. During the data collection process, I tracked participant responses to help determine when to conclude data collection. After the eighth interview, there was potential for a data-directed argument for ending recruitment (see Results section; Tables 2-4), which was lower than the projections above. To be certain, I continued data collection which resulted in additional similarities in responses in interviews nine through twelve when grouped with the prior

interviews. The decision to conclude data analysis at that point was made through reflecting on interviews, tracking responses in data collection and analysis, and discussing findings with an independent coder. Thus, while projections of sample size were made prior to the investigation, decisions on final sample size were made for data-driven reasons resulting from data analysis of participant responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was an ongoing process occurring throughout and after the data collection period. I utilized reflexive thematic analysis to develop themes that provide deeper understandings of the research question. Although data analysis was an iterative process, the phases of thematic analysis follow: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme refinement, theme naming, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016).

The initial phases included transcribing the audio recorded interviews and rereading the transcriptions to check for accuracy. This process of immersion helps increase familiarization with the material as rich data rather than as information (Braun et al., 2016). Next, I read through the data and wrote initial codes in the margins of the transcripts. The following section provides a more detailed description of the coding process and subsequent phases completed in this investigation.

From a broader qualitative scope, the investigation used an inductive approach where patterns of meaning and interpretations were based on participant responses rather than predetermined themes (Patton, 2002). From the specific analytic perspective, the codes that were eventually clustered into themes were identified on inductive and

deductive levels. Braun and Clarke explain a common misconception where researchers view coding decisions as either/or choices: inductive or deductive coding; semantic or latent coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). However, many studies utilizing reflexive thematic analysis incorporate both inductive and deductive, as well as semantic and latent elements (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). Coding decisions should be purposeful and fit the nature of the investigation. The reflexive thematic analysis for this investigation included both inductive and deductive, as well as semantic and latent coding. The study was guided and interpreted within the RMMDI framework (Jones & Abes, 2013); in turn, codes were identified on a deductive, latent level (e.g., athletic identity as core identity; interaction: athlete and family identity). In addition, as studying athletic identity within the RMMDI framework is a novel approach, there were not preexisting concepts for some topics that were presented in the interviews (e.g., performance impacting self-concept; detailing injury experiences). Thus, codes were identified on inductive, semantic levels. Within the guiding framework, concept-driven codes (i.e., deductive, latent) were identified for content with fitting concepts (e.g., identity salience, contextual factors) and data-driven codes (i.e., inductive, semantic) were identified for all other relevant participant responses.

The coding and theme development phases were completed with the assistance of another independent coder. I met with the independent coder and practiced the interview with her before data collection began, which helped to familiarize both of us with the process. We discussed coding plans, reflexive thematic analysis resources, and the RMMDI framework (e.g., core identity, social identity, identity salience, interacting

identities, conflicting identities, contextual factors, and meaning making; Jones & Abes, 2013) prior to starting the coding meetings. The independent coder and I coded transcripts separately before meeting to discuss the codes (average of three transcripts reviewed each meeting). Braun & Clarke (2019) explain that when more than one coder is involved in the data analysis process, the goal in reflexive thematic analysis is to work toward a collaborative, nuanced reading of the data. While consensus is not the stated goal in reflexive thematic analysis, the independent coder and I shared several similarities in our coding of the data. The differences in coding between myself and the independent coder were discussed and addressed depending on the circumstance. For instance, at times one coder included a code that the other coder did not include in a section; however, the code was often included elsewhere on the page or within the transcript. In such cases, we discussed the reason for including in the section, but did not rewrite the code on the list. Codes that were created by one coder and not included by the other coder were discussed and added to the group of codes. Such codes were relevant to the topic of athletic identity, but were not central findings (e.g., “specialization” was discussed in an early meeting and coded in subsequent transcripts). Most often, differences in codes were more a matter of wording than differences in understanding. Thus, such codes were combined to work toward a collaborative, more nuanced understanding of the data (e.g., “athletic community” and “sense of belonging” became “athletic community: sense of belonging”).

During the iterative process, the codes were organized and reorganized in a revised list. The codes were clustered into potential themes, which were reviewed to

develop finalized themes that provide detailed responses to the research question. The independent coder and I discussed theme clusters as well as the finalized themes. Themes were named, defined, and detailed in analytic writings. Working with an independent coder and writing memos helped work toward reflexivity and transparency in the data analysis process. More specifically, project meeting preparations and discussions were helpful for increasing self-awareness, communicating perspectives, and addressing potential assumptions made in coding. In addition, the coding process described above demonstrates ways in which the independent coder and I worked to develop themes based on participant responses. In this way, we remained transparent about our positioning and allowed the data to drive the direction of the themes that were generated in the process. To work toward conducting quality reflexive thematic analysis, I used the criteria specified by Braun and Clarke during data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016).

### **Trustworthiness and Qualitative Excellence**

Matters of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiries are commonly described using the following criteria: credibility; transferability, dependability, and confirmability (e.g., Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). Credibility can be defined as the fit between the participants' responses and the researcher's understandings and presentation of such responses. Transferability pertains to the relatability of findings, where readers can relate to the accounts of the participants and establish links between the participants' experiences and the experiences of others. Dependability relates to coherence in the research process, where investigations must be conducted in a logical, traceable fashion.

Confirmability describes clear links between the data and the interpretations where researchers can provide documented evidence for the claims that are made from the data (Schwandt et al., 2007). Further, Tracy (2010) describes criteria for qualitative excellence: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. This section outlines methods and practices used in this study to enhance rigor and work toward qualitative excellence.

### **Worthy Topic**

The subject matter and investigation both constitute a worthy topic. The emphasis on survey approaches has resulted in an incomplete understanding of athletic identity as deeper meanings of the construct are taken for granted. Only few studies that have taken inductive approaches have examined the meanings of athletic identity from participant perspectives (e.g., Newton et al., in press). The study is positioned within the RMMDI framework which works toward providing a better understanding of athletic identity as situated within the multidimensional self and social context (Jones & Abes, 2013); this framing of the current investigation is consistent with conceptualizations in psychological identity theories (Stets & Burke, 2000). Thus, the investigation provides a more nuanced view of athletic identity as meanings are explored and presented within the RMMDI framework. Greater understandings of this construct are relevant to the fields of sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development.

### **Rich Rigor**

The investigation presents rich data taken from student-athlete accounts through the use of the following: open-ended interview questions, participant identity



representations through use of the RMMDI-inspired model, and participant reflections on such positioning provided on the model. Regarding theoretical constructs (Tracy, 2010), the investigation was framed by the RMMDI which is an appropriate framework for the investigation with explicit connections to identity theories (e.g., multidimensional self, identity salience, contextual influences; Jones & Abes, 2013). The RMMDI framework helped guide the investigation and conceptualize the findings (e.g., ways in which athletic identity is positioned within the holistic self-concept). Further, throughout the research process, I followed the procedures described above for data collection and data analysis (Tracy, 2010).

### **Sincerity**

The investigation is marked by honesty and transparency. For greater transparency, I included a reflexivity statement in Chapter I. Further, I clearly describe the procedures for data collection and analysis. Both discussions and writing on the research process, as well as external auditing, will provide additional steps reflective of sincerity (Patton, 2002; Schwandt et al., 2007). In addition to recording field notes after interviews, I wrote memos (e.g., analytic memos regarding positioning in RMMDI-inspired model; reflexivity memos) throughout the research process to remain transparent about my positioning (Patton, 2002). Lastly, project meetings with an independent coder throughout data collection and analysis helped to work toward reflexivity and transparency.

## **Credibility**

The findings present thick descriptions of participant accounts allowing readers to more clearly take in the student-athlete perspective. Following each interview, I used reflections to further discuss standout information from the meeting and received participant feedback on the initial interpretations before conclusion of the meetings. Toward the end of data analysis, I sent out collective themes so that participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on themes. The member reflection process provides a way to encourage participant feedback on the interpretations regarding findings (Schwandt et al., 2007).

## **Resonance**

According to Tracy (2010), the use of thick descriptions and evocative representations from participant accounts can allow the reader to better understand the participant perspective (i.e., perspectives of the student-athletes). I aimed to provide rich, sufficient descriptions so that readers can establish similarities between the cases and potential transference to other cases. Thus, through this resonance, readers can see ways in which such accounts may be similar or transferable to the situations of other athletes (Tracy, 2010).

## **Significant Contribution**

This investigation presents a more complex view of athletic identity as deeper meanings of the construct are explored and presented, expanding on theoretical conceptualizations of the topic. More nuanced understandings of athletic identity are of great importance to practitioners working with student-athletes, especially as such

understandings enhance practitioner competency. Further, these understandings can be catalytic for future research to expand on the understandings of athletic identity in several populations.

### **Ethical**

I followed and continue to adhere to ethical guidelines throughout the research process (Tracy, 2010). In addition, I followed procedural ethics, such as submitting to the IRB and followed the procedures approved by the IRB. I also adhered to relational ethics, such as treating participants with respect and dignity.

### **Meaningful Coherence**

The research plans and execution of plans demonstrate the use of appropriate methods and procedures to work toward the research aims in the investigation (Tracy, 2010). Decisions pertaining to the research process are stated explicitly and study findings display clear connections to the purpose of the investigation. Further, the theoretical framework, methods, findings, interpretations, and related implications both connect to and expand understandings in existing literature (Tracy, 2010).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this investigation was to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context. The study was guided and organized within the RMMDI framework and data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Jones & Abes, 2013). Summaries of relevant findings are provided before delving into the presentation of themes. Domain summaries are grouped by shared topics (e.g., benefits, drawbacks) while fully realized themes are developed and display shared patterns of meaning connected by a central organizing concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Due to the novelty of the study, where athletic identity is examined within the RMMDI framing, it is important to first present the summary of content in order to detail the responses and provide a grounding of understandings within this approach. Braun & Clarke (2019) describe domain summaries as underdeveloped themes; notably, the summary of responses provided in tables below are not the product of the reflexive thematic analysis. After the presentation of the summaries, the following sections will focus on the fully realized themes, which were generated in the reflexive thematic analysis.

Summaries provided in the tables are interconnected and shown in the themes that are organized around central concepts. In the individual interviews, participants were asked to situate their identities within the RMMDI-inspired model representing the

holistic self (Table 2). In addition, the positioning of athletic identity was discussed during the interviews (Table 3). Participants listed and described contextual factors that impact their self-view (Table 4); the ways in which participants described their identities in relation to the contextual influences were interpreted in data analysis (i.e., meaning-making capacity; Table 5). Following the summaries of content which are grouped by shared topics (Tables 2-5), the fully realized themes connected by shared patterns of meanings are presented.

As shown in Table 2, participants situated identities in different ways with the use of the RMMDI-inspired model. Many participants listed athletic identity among their core identities and traits while most others included athletic identity as an important identity outside of the core in the model.

*Table 2. Mapping Responses: Positioning of Identities (IDs) and Traits*

Participant	Core ID/Traits	IDs/Traits Closer to Core	IDs/Traits Mid-Level	IDs/Traits Further from Core
P1	Student, Detailed	Significant Other	Daughter, Coach, Structured	Religion, Social Class, Overachiever, Determined
P2	Friend, Sister, Daughter, Hardworking, Caring	<b>Athlete</b> , Empathetic, Driven, Determined		Student, Significant Other, Goal- Oriented
P3	Christian, Sister, Daughter, Kind	Female, Hardworking, Resilient	Student- <b>Athlete</b> , Smart	Calm

P4	Christian, <b>Athlete</b> , Outgoing, Determined		Student, Female, Hispanic American, Heterosexual, Healthy	Friendly
P5	Christian, Sister, Daughter, <b>Athlete</b> , Leader	Female, Student, Smart		Undergraduate, Approachable, Average Height
P6	<b>Athlete</b> , Family Member, Working Class, Ambitious, Friendly	Leader, Competitive		Student, White, Heterosexual
P7	Christian, <b>Athlete</b> , Son, Brother, Competitor Determined, Loving	Friend, Caring, Compassionate	Social	Student
P8	Christian, Friend, Loving, Faithful	Hardworking, Loyal	Sister, Daughter	Female, Student, <b>Athlete</b>
P9	Believer in Christ	Brother, Friend, Genuine	<b>Athlete</b> , Leader, Committed, Caring	Student, Intuitive
P10	<b>Athlete</b> , Family Member, Boyfriend,	Leader, Resilience, Hardworking, Respectful	Friend, Extrovert, Result- Oriented, Competitive	Community Member, Intelligent

	Committed, Happy		
P11	Christian, Student, <b>Athlete</b> , Hardworking, Family- Oriented	Daughter, Sister, Asian- White American, Organized, Caring	Female, Middle Class, Heterosexual, Adventurous, Creative, Helpful, Not Easily Persuaded
P12	Female, Christian, Loyal	Sister, Daughter, Friend, Student, Hardworking	<b>Athlete</b> , Thoughtful

Table 3 shows the ways in which athletic identity was positioned as well as the rationale for the positioning of the identity within the holistic self. Participants listed and described athletic identity as a core identity ( $n = 6$ ), a salient identity ( $n = 3$ ), a less salient identity ( $n = 2$ ), and as no longer central nor salient (not included on the model;  $n = 1$ ). The categorization used in this table is consistent with the RMMDI framing (Jones & Abes, 2013). As a core identity, athletic identity was included in the center circle of the diagram. With categorization as a salient identity, athletic identity was not placed in the center, but close to the center circle of the diagram, before and/or along with other identities and traits. As a less salient identity, athletic identity was included on the periphery of the diagram after and/or along with other identities and traits.

*Table 3. Athletic Identity Positioning and Rationale*

Participant	Positioning	Rationale
P1	Not Included	“Obviously it's [being an athlete] a big part of my life right now... At this point, going into my final season, I really don't care to be an athlete anymore... Like back in the past, that was like the end-all-be-all... now I'm just like, it's a scholarship... So I decided to leave it off of it [the diagram]. Again, two years ago probably would've been in the middle.”
P2	Salient ID	“So athlete is just something I kind of, I've always identified myself as... it's something I've always thought of myself as. But as I've gotten older, I've kind of realized that that's not just who I am, there's more to it than that.”
P3	Salient ID	“Being a student-athlete is a really big part of who I am, but it's not as important as the other things because the other things are more like I guess moral and ethical kind of things.”
P4	Core ID	“It's [being an athlete] a big part of who I am. I don't really know who I am outside of it, I guess. I'm starting to... it's all I've ever known and I don't think I'm going to let that go anytime soon.”
P5	Core ID	“I think being an athlete plays a big role of how I view myself... How successful I am as an athlete kind of tells me where I am in life... I think, and I tell myself I'm a student-athlete just to kind of remember that I am a person, and an athlete is who I've become over the years.”
P6	Core ID	“I think just again, the fact that I've identified as that [athlete], for so long. It's something that my, pretty much my whole life is based around, so I think it deserves a place in the center [of the diagram].”



P7	Core ID	“I've been an athlete since I was three or four or five, so that's been such a part of my life, who I am... it's part of my identity just because, it's first of what I love. The sport itself is what I love and, it's such a daily routine, that I would say it's such a big part of who I am because of the amount of time I put into it.”
P8	Less Salient ID	“I put it on the outside [of the diagram] just cause like I like being an athlete... but it's not central to who I am, it's just kind of like part of who I am... cause I think if I'm not loving or a friend or faithful or grounded in my faith, those things are like really how I define myself.”
P9	Salient ID	“It's [being an athlete is] secondary to how I view myself, it's on that kind of secondary level. It's a huge part of it. It's what I spend most of my time on... it's a part of everything that I do, but it's not who I am.”
P10	Core ID	“That's who I am, that's me (pointing to word “athlete”). I define myself as an athlete... everything I do, in my day to day life... being an athlete is, is everything I am right now.”
P11	Core ID	“The way I think about being an athlete... having the drive and having hard work and determination, working on the team. Like, kind of like the qualities of an athlete.”
P12	Less Salient ID	“Someday, you're not going to be an athlete anymore. So the things that you learn while you're in athletics become the most important thing. Of course I didn't leave it too far out [on diagram] because it still is like a major part in my life, and I do love it. But all of these things that like I've grown to know and have grown to be a part of me has actually, I think been more important to me than actually athletics itself.”

Table 4 summarizes the contextual influences described throughout the interviews. Participants listed contextual factors with the use of the mapping activity and

also described outside influences on identity in other parts of the interview (content included in italics indicates responses that were not listed on the mapping activity but were described during the interviews). As displayed in Table 4, participants included and/or discussed both sport-related and non-sport-related influences on their identities.

*Table 4. Mapping Responses: Contextual Influences*

Participant	Contextual Factors
P1	Family messages; Injury experiences; Athletic experiences; Financial factors; <i>Upperclassmen transition reflections</i>
P2	Injury experiences; Athletic accomplishments; Family learning experiences; <i>Upperclassmen transition reflections</i>
P3	Family and coach messages; Athletic experiences; General campus messages; Family learning experiences; Campus learning experiences; <i>Upperclassmen transition reflections</i>
P4	Family and coach messages; Athletic experiences; <i>Former coach influence</i>
P5	Family messages; Athletic experiences; Student-athlete responsibilities; Campus learning experiences; Family learning experiences; Faith messages
P6	Family and athletic community messages; Injury experiences; Peer relationship messages; General learning experiences; <i>International athlete</i>
P7	Athletic accomplishments; Injury Experiences; Family messages; Faith messages
P8	Injury experiences; Past performance concerns; Faith messages; Family messages
P9	Athletic experiences; Family messages; Faith messages; General learning experiences; Campus learning experiences

P10	Athletic experiences; Sport-related family learning experience; <i>International athlete</i>
P11	Overcoming negative messages; Family messages; Athletic experiences; Faith messages; <i>Upperclassmen transition reflections</i>
P12	Injury experiences; Athletic community messages; Athletic experiences; Family messages; Career influences; <i>Upperclassmen transition reflections</i>

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In Table 5, the ways in which participants described their self-view in relation to the context are displayed. The categorization used in this table is consistent with the meaning making concepts described in the RMMDI framework (Jones & Abes, 2013). With external meaning making, contextual factors had a great impact on self-views (e.g., largely defining self-views based on athletic experiences). Self-authorship, or internal meaning making, describes a lens where individuals took more ownership of their self-view (e.g., recognizing athletic contextual norms and taking ownership of how such external factors impact self-views). Those in the process of moving toward self-authorship were categorized as transitioning to internal meaning making (e.g., in process of forming self-views that were not based on athletic experiences). As shown in Table 5 with the positioning and related rationale, most participants were categorized as transitioning to internal meaning making ( $n = 6$ ) while others were categorized within the self-authorship ( $n = 4$ ) and external meaning making groups ( $n = 2$ ).

*Table 5. Intrapersonal Meaning Making*

Participant	Meaning Making	Rationale
P1	Transition to Internal	Explanations suggest distancing self from external norms, but in process of forming self-views
P2	Transition to Internal	Describes recognition of athletic transition; transitioning from viewing self in relation to sport
P3	Self-Authorship	Describes norms, learning experiences (e.g., issue awareness), and choosing own self-view
P4	External	Athletic messages and contextual factors seem to have strong impact on self-definition
P5	Transition to Internal	Explanations support a recognition of norms; in process of defining self with knowledge of norms
P6	Transition to Internal	Responses suggest process of actively positioning self in sport, not passively defining self by sport
P7	External	Athletic contextual factors and accomplishments seem to have strong impact on self-definition
P8	Self-Authorship	Describes norms, learning experiences (e.g., faith, injury), and choosing own self-view
P9	Self-Authorship	Describes norms, learning experiences (e.g., redefining) and choosing own self-view
P10	Transition to Internal	Responses suggest process of actively positioning self in sport, not passively defining self by sport
P11	Self-Authorship	Describes learning experiences (e.g., defying stereotypes) and choosing own of self-definition
P12	Transition to Internal	Discusses past injuries and recognizing athletic transition; transitioning from viewing self in relation to sport

While the tables above display summaries of data, the following sections focus on the fully realized themes developed through data analysis. From the reflexive thematic analysis, three themes were generated to describe a more complex conceptualization of athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context: Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self; Lifelong Immersion in Sport Context; and “It’s a Lifestyle”: Passion for the Game. The investigation was grounded in the RMMDI framework and the analytic process included inductive and deductive elements. Thus, while the themes were developed with a code-driven approach as opposed to predetermined categories (e.g., core identity theme, meaning making theme), the resulting themes still show clear connections to the RMMDI framework (Jones & Abes, 2013).

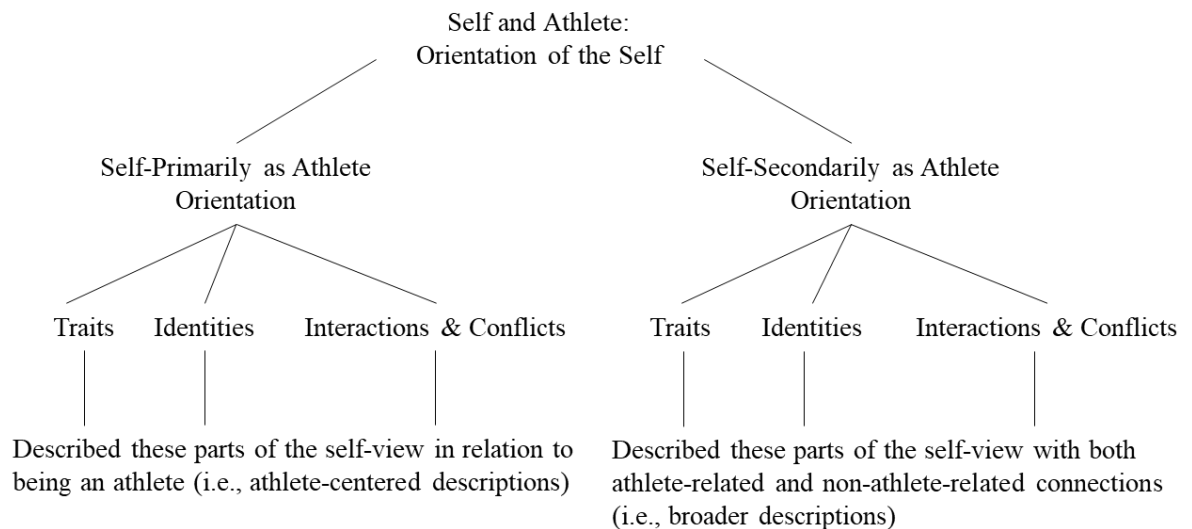
### **Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self**

The “Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self” theme, the most detailed of the three, describes the positioning of identities and traits as well as the corresponding rationales given by the study participants. More importantly, the central organizing concept centers on the term “orientation.” Participants who positioned athletic identity as a core identity discussed other roles and traits in relation to this identity ( $n = 5$ ; “self-primarily as athlete orientation”). In comparison, the participants who positioned athletic identity outside of the core, and one who positioned athletic identity as a core identity (P11), described athletic identity as important, but on a secondary level along with other relevant identities ( $n = 7$ ; “self-secondarily as athlete orientation”). For these participants, other identities were not described in relation to athletic identity, but together with

athletic identity. These orientations were evident throughout individual meetings as the perspectives permeated responses across sections of the interview. Figure 2 provides an outline of the present theme displaying how identities, traits, and connections between identities were discussed differently across the two orientation groups.

*Figure 2*

*Organization of “Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self” Theme*



**Self-Primarily as Athlete Orientation**

Participants described as operating from a self-primarily as athlete orientation included athletic identity as a core identity and described other traits and roles in relation to being an athlete. Notably, all individuals categorized as having a self-primarily as athlete orientation planned to continue their careers in the upcoming years (i.e., two freshmen, one redshirt freshmen, and two graduate students planning to pursue professional careers). A self-primarily as athlete orientation does not indicate that these

participants lacked other core identities (see Table 2); however, the descriptions and explanations provide evidence that athletic identity is central to their self-views. As P7, a male soccer player explained:

I've been an athlete since I was three or four or five, so that's been such a part of my life, who I am... it's part of my identity just because, it's first of what I love. (Later in interview) I would say that "how does being an athlete fit within your view of yourself?" I would say that it is kind of just my view of myself, in general. - P7

Such responses describe the magnitude that athletic identity can have within the overall self-concept. Consistently, P4, a softball player shared similar views:

It's [being an athlete] a big part of who I am. I don't really know who I am outside of it, I guess. I'm starting to. I'm not playing as much as I did when I was younger because it's only college now. It's not two different teams now... it's all I've ever known and I don't think I'm going to let that go anytime soon. – P4

The descriptions support that athletic identity can be one of few personally important identities within the view of self. In addition to describing athletic identity as a central part of the self-concept, participants categorized with a self-primarily as athlete orientation provided responses about their behaviors that fit within traditional views of athlete self-schemata (e.g., healthy eating) as well as more complex views. P5, a female basketball player, explained that her responses may differ on the mapping activity depending on whether she answered as an athlete or as a person. For example, her identity as a woman would be of more importance as a person and of less importance as an athlete: "I mean, I'm an athlete, male or female, like I'm an athlete." In the latter part

of the interview, she explained that the mapping activity depicted her representation of self from both athlete and person perspectives (i.e., the descriptors of female and height would change depending on perspective, but were balanced in the model). When asked which perspective she typically operates from, P5 shared the following:

I think probably from an athletic... just because athletics is kind of like in the driver's seat right now as far as where I'm going in life just with the fact that, the scholarship and who I am. So, yeah, I think I operate from the athletic part... Like I know like where I am as a person is because of my athletic self right now. – P5

This description brings attention to an important element regarding understandings of self-schemata. Typically, athlete schemata are explained as they relate to physical matters and decisions (e.g., athletic body types and diet decisions), but above, metaphysical matters are discussed from an athletic lens. More specifically, athletic identity is not simply listed as a self-perception; rather, self-perception is described through the lens of athletic identity. Similar to P5's responses, which indicate that her self-concept could be seen through an athletic lens, other participants categorized as having a self-primarily as athlete orientation also provided evidence for understanding their identities and traits through an athletic lens. This claim is supported in their description of individual traits and identities.

**Self-primarily as athlete orientation: Traits.** Participant descriptions in this group indicated the centrality of athletic identity by showing that several personal traits that were included during the mapping activity are tied to being an athlete. Participants explained that different aspects of their identity are organized around being an athlete.



P10, a male soccer player, and P4, a softball player, discussed the interconnections between their athletic identity and personal traits:

That's who I am, that's me. I define myself as an athlete... everything I do, in my day to day life... and maybe all of the other traits that I've written around here, they are all directly related to being an athlete. And if I was not an athlete, maybe I wouldn't have some of these, personal traits that I've written down. – P10

I think the motivation for me to be determined and healthy comes from being an athlete. So they're [traits] all kind of rooted in being an athlete. – P4

The responses provided by participants in this group indicate that athletic identity does not simply hold great importance in and of itself, but is important due to interconnections with and fostering of other traits. Thus, as participant accounts show, athletic identity can hold a central place in the holistic self as personal traits can be “directly related to” and “rooted in being an athlete.”

**Self-primarily as athlete orientation: Identities.** Identities that were listed and described by participants in the self-primarily and secondarily as athlete orientation groups were similar (see Table 2). Identities included were often of family (son/daughter, brother/sister), friend, and student roles as well as faith and gender identities (included by most female participants). However, those in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group described other identities in relation to athletic identity. As P6, a male soccer player explained:

It's [being an athlete] something that my, pretty much my whole life is based around... For me I feel as if I probably play better in my sport if I'm maybe not as focused on it... it's just a bit of an escape to get away and like listen to music...

And that's another part instead of it just being soccer, soccer, soccer... you have the athlete, which is a massive part of it [self-concept]. But I think for me it's important to have these other parts [identities]. – P6

Although P6 describes the importance of having other roles, he begins his rationale by explaining that his sport performance is improved when he does other activities, showing an athletic orientation in this description. Additionally, P4 discusses the importance of athletic identity by explaining that she thinks of the identity more than other roles. More specifically, when asked about the importance of the identities in the center circle of her diagram she used comparisons to her racial and gender identities to explain differences:

The other ones [faith identity and athletic identity] in the center are more on my mind every day, I think about those and live those out every day... I don't constantly think that like, 'Oh, I'm Hispanic American,' or, 'I'm female.' Like that's just in the back of my mind. (Later in interview; referring to identities in center circle) like I work towards those and I value those more than the things in the other circle. - P4

From the descriptions and reflections in the interview, P4 explains that her core identities include those that she thinks about more often and values more than other identities. Throughout the interview, the importance of athletic identity permeated responses. Thus, the value of athletic identity described with use of the diagram was supported by the centrality of athletic identity evident in responses. She explains that she does not think of her racial or gender identities as often as her identity as an athlete; athletic identity is described as central and personally valuable because she works toward daily improvement. In contrast, racial and gender identities do not have the same mixture

of performative, competitive, and evaluative aspects. Different combinations of the preceding factors (e.g., competitive, evaluative) are present in sport and may explain a drive for daily improvement in the athletic realm.

**Self-primarily as athlete orientation: Identity interactions and conflicts.** With the interactions and conflicts between identities, there were more similarities in accounts than differences when comparing self-primarily and secondarily as athlete orientation groups. For example, some participants noted that athlete and student roles can be conflicting due to the amount of time that is needed to perform each role successfully. Also, responses indicated that athlete and friend roles can interact as close, lifelong bonds can be formed with teammates through sport. While there are notable similarities, there is a difference in the orientation groups pertaining to the connection of identities. Participants in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group often described interactions and conflicts centered on being an athlete (e.g., athlete and family identity). Those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation discussed both athlete-centered connections and broader connections (e.g., friend and sister). Thus, while similar roles were listed, those who described being an athlete more centrally often discussed conflicts and interactions in relation to their athlete role. For example, P7, a male soccer player detailed the connections between athlete and friend roles:

Athletes as friends, I think, it can go both ways too... you can lose friends because you have so much time into the sport that you lose some friends. Back in high school, I know that I definitely didn't have as many friends as I could have because of the time and effort I've put into sport. And then I also think you make your greatest friends you'll ever have through sports because of the things you're going through, the pain, the tears, the joy of winning, just everything, you walk

right beside them through, especially in college, you get to see everything, the good, the bad. And you can find your best friends. – P7

This participant response details understandings that are present across orientation groups. Participants in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group often described different connections between athletic identity and other identities while those in the second group discussed a combination of athlete and general identity connections.

### **Self-Secondarily as Athlete Orientation**

Participants categorized as having a self-secondarily as athlete orientation discussed athletic identity in relation with other identities. The participants explained that athletic identity was important, but their personal traits and identities were not oriented around athletic identity. In comparison to the self-primarily as athlete orientation group, several participants in this group were closer to the end of their athletic careers (i.e., one sophomore, three juniors, two seniors, and one graduate student). Notably, most participants expressed that athletic identity had been central in the past, but explained one or more reasons that athletic identity was no longer central. Many participants in this group described a combination of injury experiences and views as upperclassmen that impacted their identities. The similar responses explained by these three upperclassmen participants (two women's soccer and one softball player) detail how athletic identity was a significant identity in the past, but that changes in circumstances influenced shifts in self-perceptions:

At this point, going into my final season, I really don't care to be an athlete anymore... Like back in the past, that was like the end-all-be-all. That was who I

was and it's what I was known for... (After describing injury concerns) two years ago [athlete] probably would've been in the middle, student and then athlete, but not anymore. – P1, senior women's soccer player

(Describing injury experiences) I think that's where it really hit me that like I had to kind of look back at myself and think like, 'Who am I as a person without softball?' And that was like a really hard concept for me to grasp because I was like, 'I don't know who I am without softball. Like, who is [name]?' (Describing positioning of athlete on diagram before injury) Right in the center. It would be absolutely in the center. – P12, junior softball player

So athlete is just something I kind of, I've always identified myself as... being an athlete is great, but it's not the only thing in life, especially once I'll be graduating soon, so I kind of have to like figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. Like I can't, I always identify myself as an athlete... I want to be a good person and not just a great athlete. – P2, senior women's soccer player

Participant responses indicate that injury and upcoming athletic transitions prompted self-reflection and shifts in identity (see Theme Connections section for greater detail on these contextual influences). From these accounts, it seems that the participants may have operated from a self-primarily as athlete orientation in the past. Statements such as referring to being an athlete as the “end-all-be-all” and a need to answer the question of “who am I as a person without (sport)?” gives evidence of athletic identities that had been central prior to the experiences described.

In addition to injury experiences and self-reflections as upperclassmen, some participants discussed athletic identity in relation to their faith identity. Several participants across both orientation groups included religious or spiritual identities in the mapping activity (see Table 2). In the participant diagrams, athletic identity was consistently listed only second to faith identity (i.e., when a religious or spiritual identity

was listed, the identity was often positioned centrally; athletic identity was positioned in a broader range of locations). In discussing identity positioning and rationale, some participants explained that athletic identity was not central because the identity was second to their faith identity. These participants (women's and men's soccer players and a softball player) provided similar rationales detailing the positioning of their faith and athletic identities:

I put it on the outside just cause like I like being an athlete... but it's not central to who I am, it's just kind of like part of who I am... 'cause I think if I'm not loving or a friend or faithful or grounded in my faith, those things are like really how I define myself. – P8, graduate women's soccer player

[Being an athlete is] a part of my identity with, I mean my identity is in Christ, but it's a part of my identity... It's secondary to how I view myself, it's on that kind of secondary level. It's a huge part of it. It's what I spend most of my time on. It's what I spend most of my time thinking about and where I spend most of my time that I enjoy. I enjoy all of it... it's a part of everything that I do, but it's not who I am. – P9, sophomore men's soccer player

Being a student-athlete is a really big part of who I am, but it's not as important as the other things because the other things are more like I guess moral and ethical kind of things. – P3, junior softball player

The responses support that athletic identity is important, but second to faith identity for these participants. In P9's description, the rationale suggests that he does not have a lesser view of sport, but has a central view of his faith; this finding provides additional support that the distinguishing element between self-primarily and secondarily as athlete groups is the orientation of their self-view. Further, for participants in this group, personal traits and identities were not centered on identity as an athlete.

**Self-secondarily as athlete orientation: Traits.** Participants in this group described personal traits more broadly when compared to the self-primarily as athlete orientation group. These characteristics were discussed as related to being an athlete, other roles, or both athletic identity and other roles. As P2, a female soccer player explained:

Personally, right now goal-driven is towards soccer and my accomplishments for that that I would like to see happen. But that also goes into school. And even like when I'm working, if I have a job that's, it goes along with that too. – P2

These descriptions show that P2 sees that her personal characteristics can be helpful to sport as well as other areas in life. Additionally, P8, a female soccer player, described areas of her self-concept that were not sport-specific, which is characteristic of the broader range of descriptions in the self-secondarily as athlete group:

I put Christian, because my faith is like the center of who I am. I think everything builds from that and then I put faithful, friend, loving cause I think those are like the most important attributes I think in my life. – P8

The responses indicate that the personal traits for the athletes in this group were not oriented solely around athletic identity. Although participants in this group viewed their traits more broadly, there is a notable similarity between groups. Regardless of orientation group, participants explained that being an athlete is “growing” or “enhancing” them as individuals (quotations from P7 and P3), as evidenced by the traits that are fostered from being an athlete. On this topic, the difference between groups is that those operating from a self-secondarily as athlete orientation more often discussed

the transfer of traits to different contexts. Similar to P2's description in the previous section, the responses from two softball players included below present individual qualities that can be cultivated in sports and taken to different environments:

I think it [being an athlete] is a really big part of who I am and it's helped me develop some of the other characteristics that I listed that I also identify with. It's helped me I guess enhance those, I had those characteristics, but part of being an athlete really helped me, I guess make those stronger characteristics that I have. – P3

The hard work, dedication, perseverance... I feel like being an athlete and just like all the skills and the things I've learned from it have made me the person I am... I would say I've learned a lot of things about just like working with people, like my relationships with others and just kind of like learning... And just kind of valuing something other than yourself. Like putting the team first is important. – P11

These responses emphasize the transfer of skills learned in athletics to other settings. Although the sophomore (P9) in this group shared similar understandings (e.g., applying lessons learned in soccer to life), the descriptions are more representative of upperclassmen responses, suggesting that the participant statements may have been influenced by reflections on their eventual transitions out of sports.

**Self-secondarily as athlete orientation: Identities.** Participants in this group discussed athletic identity as related to other identities. Although identities included on models were similar across groups, identities for these participants were not oriented around athletic identity. As P1, a female soccer player described:

The identity as a student, I think it's the most important because at this point I do want to go to grad school. – P1



The response provides an example of ways in which participants in this group described roles (e.g., student and friend) as important, independent of their relation to being an athlete. Similarly, those in this group discussed social identities (e.g., race and gender) as salient identities that were not always associated with their athletic identities.

P11 explained:

(When discussing identities on diagram) The Asian-Caucasian, I think it's kind of like, I'm big into my heritage and my family, like kind of like ties into my family and our just traditions and culture and stuff like that. – P11

The responses display broader views of the self and the inclusion of identities that are maintained outside of playing sports. These responses demonstrate that participants in this group described different identities that are not oriented around being an athlete.

**Self-secondarily as athlete orientation: Identity interactions and conflicts.**

While similar connections between identities were present across groups, the participants in this orientation group discussed identity connections with athletic identity and non-sport related identities (i.e., broader range of responses than those in self-primarily as athlete orientation group). For example, P8 described conflicts between identities that are not oriented around sport:

Like sister, daughter, like friend, like relationships, can conflict with some core things sometimes... no one's perfect all the time. So it's like if I'm mad at my [siblings] am I really being loving and faithful? – P8

The response gives support that participants in this group discussed connections between identities more broadly when compared to the self-primarily as athlete group.

While non-sport related identities were discussed by participants in this group, participants also described connections between athletic identity and other roles:

I would say, being an athlete, especially with the daughter aspect of it, my parents are very supportive of me. I think they come to almost every single game... my dad has always been big in sports. I think that's one way that we bond. – P11

Being a female, sometimes you're kind of put at a disadvantage. So I think that the hardworking, resilience can kind of intertwine with that one... Being athletic as a female, sometimes people look at you differently or they think that you're like not as good as, for example in softball, baseball players, or something like that... You always feel like you have to work harder to prove yourself I feel like as a female sometimes. – P3

These descriptions show the broader range of responses for those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group, while also showing the similarities in responses between groups. For instance, the responses shared by P3 were similar to that of P5 who is in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group. P3, P5, and P12 discussed a connection between athlete and female identities; they discussed that others may think less of them in their roles and described a desire to prove themselves as athletes. P8 also mentioned gender, but explained feeling that the issues may be more characteristic of the professional level. Further, on the topic of family, P11's comments are representative of several participants across groups who discussed connections between their athletic identity and family roles.

### **Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture**

The “Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture” theme describes contextual factors influencing participants’ identities. More specifically, the central organizing concept

focuses on the constant engagement in a sport culture that provides identity confirming messages and avenues for continued athletic advancement. Participants described outside messages and social influences during the identity mapping activity, which are included in this theme. However, the understandings and experiences shared throughout the entirety of the interview greatly contributed to the development of this theme. Key findings center on family involvement, progressing through competitive levels, and the importance of the athletic community and larger context. These subthemes presented within this theme focus on consistent engagement in the sport culture across various levels (e.g., family to broader context). Lastly, more detail on theme connections is provided following the theme descriptions. As displayed in the sections below, accounts of athletic backgrounds were similar across the self-primarily and secondarily as athlete orientation groups. The differences in perspectives seem to be related to their current contextual experiences (e.g., upperclassmen thoughts of future) rather than past contextual experiences (e.g., family, competitive experience, and community influences).

### **Family Involvement**

Participants explained that their involvement in sport was influenced by sibling and parent experiences in sport. On a smaller scale compared to the larger sport culture, it seemed that many participants had a family culture of valuing sports. Most often for the participants, the family member who was most active in sport engagement was the father, as discussed in responses by these participants (male soccer player and two softball players):

I loved that, I mean, you see your dad taking time to teach you how to shoot a ball or how to pass a ball when you're little. – P10, graduate men's soccer player

My dad's really big into sports, he pushed me a lot. My mom didn't really do much with that. She just kind of came to the games. But my dad came to every practice and every game. – P4, freshman softball player

Like ever since I was a little girl, like I would always go and watch my dad play slow pitch softball... He just loved the game... He was so passionate about it that it kind of made me be that way about it. – P12, junior softball player

Based on the responses, it seems that love for sport was often cultivated in the family environment. Most participants also discussed gaining knowledge of sports through the direction of their parents. Several participants began playing sports in early childhood (see Table 1: Years Played section); these early experiences in sport that were often initiated by parents could help foster athletic identities at early ages.

### **Progression through Competitive Levels**

While parents seemed to play a primary role in introducing the participants to sport, responses support that parents, coaches, and athletes were all involved in the continued engagement in sport. These groups recognized the athletic capabilities of the young athletes and coaches suggested opportunities to advance in sport. As P2 and P8, two female soccer players described:

Around like six or seven, I started scoring a lot more goals and actually being really good and fast on my team. So then I got recruited by a club team that travels. So at age eight I started doing that with them and then just have been doing that ever since. – P2

In the rec leagues... I would score all the time (laughing) and stuff... around like when I was like eight or so, my coaches would keep me on the field... My parents were like, “Oh we should probably try out for something a little harder.” – P8

As detailed above, the individuals in the sport community noticed athletic skill and suggested progressing to a higher level. As the level became more competitive, participants explained that the sport atmosphere became more intense. P5, a female basketball player, and P6, a male soccer player, discussed these dynamics:

I would say athletically, over the course of my life has gotten more intense, the higher levels I go. More is expected. But it's also still like the same level of fun and enjoyment is still there. – P5

I think the start with, it's mainly just enjoyment. Like you enjoy playing... it's just freedom. Like you have that, there's not really that much pressure... but then obviously as you work your way up and the level of it gets better, there's a lot more pressure on you to do well and especially when your future depends on it. – P6

Thus, athletic identities can be strengthened as athletes make progressions through athletic levels. However, with the increased pressure, athletes can see that their “future depends on” their athletic performance in the increasingly competitive contexts. In turn, it seems that the sport culture fosters the athletic lifestyle characterized by diligently striving for athletic improvement (see “‘It’s a Lifestyle’: Passion for the Game” theme for greater detail).

### **Athletic Community: Sense of Belonging**

Consistent involvement with teams and immersion in athletic communities can provide identity confirming messages. Participants explained feeling a special bond with

teammates and feeling connected to a larger athletic network. Several participants discussed making long-lasting friendships through athletics. Also, participants indicated feeling a sense of belonging on their teams and in communities. For example, when explaining how athletic and female identities can conflict, P5, a female basketball player, explained relying on her connections that she feels in her athletic community:

[As an athlete] Having a very strong frame and body is like a good thing... (Referring to non-athletes) Like girls are like, "Oh, you look like a man," or guys would be like intimidated... I just surround myself with athletes that understand, so I mean female and male athletes that understand... They understand they go through it as well. – P5

P5's responses explain that athletes may feel connected to a larger athletic community of individuals who can relate to common challenges for athletes. Similarly, P2, a female soccer player, discussed a sense of belonging on athletic teams:

I think it's great to be around a group of people who understand what you're going through and they know what happens on the play and stuff like that... everyone kind of works together, everyone wins together, everyone loses together. – P2

These responses show how deep bonds can develop with teammates due to shared experiences through athletic seasons. Such influences, experiences, and connections likely strengthen athletic identities.

### **Cultural Way of Life**

Similar to the aforementioned aspects of community, the two international participants (P6 and P10) described their sport as connected to their larger cultural context. While different participants noted connections between their role in sport and the

broader culture (e.g., gendered messages from culture; regional travel team structures; national rankings systems and exposure), P6 and P10 seemed to describe intersections between sport and national identities. Although not explicitly stated on their models, it seems that their athletic identities may be connected to their cultural and/or national identities. The following responses provide support for this claim:

Where I'm from in the UK it's like [location in] England, it's all soccer. Like that's, everyone lives and breathes soccer and it's just something that seems to be instilled within the culture I think... it's just, a bit of a way of life to be honest. – P6

So since I was a little kid, I mean soccer was on TV at home. In Spain it's the biggest sport, soccer is like mainstream. It's everywhere. So I think that that kind of influenced me a bit. – P10

These responses suggest that the contextual factors in their countries had an impact in shaping the participants' identities. Statements such as “everyone lives and breathes soccer” and “it's [soccer is] everywhere” in the accounts show the widespread impact of the sport. While these cultural influences can shape the participants' experiences, when discussing the United States and his home country, P10 suggested that similarities of being an athlete outweigh differences.

Basically even though there's some cultural differences between Europe and here [USA], being an athlete is the same. I would say it's the same all over. Just commitment, hard work. - P10

From the response, it seems that P10 speaks to the connecting aspects of sport that allow for travel (e.g., international athletes) and competition across the world (e.g., global

games). The aspects of commitment and hard work are incorporated and expounded upon in the final theme: “‘It’s a Lifestyle’: Passion for the Game.” From family to cultural influences, the subthemes presented above support that constant engagement in the sport culture can provide identity confirming messages and opportunities for athletic advancement.

### **“It’s a Lifestyle”: Passion for the Game**

The “‘It’s a Lifestyle’: Passion for the Game” theme describes the connection between passion for sport and daily decisions to work toward athletic improvement. The central organizing concept of the theme focuses on dedication to sport, which includes aspects of passion for sport and commitment to athletic performance. Topics detailing the complexities of performance in the athletic lifestyle are also incorporated in this theme (e.g., performance impacts on enjoyment). The behaviors that make up the athletic lifestyle seem to reinforce and validate athletic identity. Participants across orientation groups presented information included in the development of the current theme. After the discussion of theme content, connections between this theme and the previous themes are provided.

#### **The “Lifestyle”**

Participants described making different lifestyle decisions to work toward improvement in their sports. The daily choices (e.g., training, eating decisions) seem to be ingrained into their routines, supporting the idea that the choices make up a lifestyle. P4, a softball player, and P10, a male soccer player explained these lifestyle decisions:



We started going to this workout pitching facility my junior year in high school. It helped me like, I guess work harder and live a healthier lifestyle because they gave me like this meal plan to do. I started working out like five days a week on top of the pitching that I was doing five days a week. It just helped me value health and fitness more than I had in the past and I just got more serious about that... after I started going there, I was like thinking that, “What I'm putting in my body really affects how I do as an athlete.” I don't eat fried foods anymore and I only eat like grilled foods and stuff, and I don't really eat fast food. And I think that just became a value of mine to fuel my body properly because the other foods don't really do anything for me but slow me down. – P4

It's a lifestyle. It's, since I wake up in the morning until I go to sleep... it's how I live, because I've been doing it for so many years now... if I go to eat two days to [fast food restaurant] I feel bad because I'm not following my diet. If I go out one night, then I'm like, “Okay, I have to stop going out.” ...I cannot have the life of probably a normal student because that's the way I think. That's how my whole life has been and my routines have been... It's like if you ask me like, “Why do you brush your teeth three times a day?” It's like, “I've always done so since I was little.” So it's the same way... it's just, the way I've been raised, the way I've been taught by coaches, friends, um, anyone. – P10

These participants describe ways in which they live an athletic lifestyle where daily routines promote athletic improvement. Participants in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group generally gave detail about their athletic routines; those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group also gave responses supporting an athletic lifestyle. Providing the extended quotation from P9's discussion of his identity gives an example of this point.

It's [being an athlete] secondary to how I view myself, it's on that kind of secondary level. It's a huge part of it. It's what I spend most of my time on. It's what I spend most of my time thinking about and where I spend most of my time that I enjoy, my free time, when I enjoy doing things, it's either watching soccer, playing [soccer video game], going and playing in, or training, and then games. I enjoy all of it... I do everything that I can to improve, improve myself and for my

team. Disciplined with what I eat, what I do off the field, what I do on the field. - P9

As the responses indicate, participants across orientation groups described “the lifestyle” of being an athlete as important in their daily lives. All participants competed on the Division I level; thus, there would be a minimum of “lifestyle” standards that must be met to continue sport involvement. Participant descriptions explained similarities (e.g., training, healthy decisions) and differences (e.g., specifics of healthy decisions) in their athletic lifestyles. According to accounts, the lifestyle can be described in the following way: consistent decisions made to meet and/or exceed expectations of the individual and broader sport culture. Participants detailed having a love, passion, and/or enjoyment of their sports that seemed to drive their dedication to their athletic lifestyle.

### **Athletic Lifestyle Reflects Athletic Focus: “Having Fun” to “Want to Win”**

Participants explained that at younger ages, sport involvement centered more on fun and enjoyment. Over the years as competitive levels increased, participants expressed that enjoyment became tied to winning and performing well. Thus, the lifestyle would also be characterized by a dedication to improved performance. P3 and P2, female softball and soccer players, detailed this shift in perspective:

I think more whenever I was younger... it was more just about having fun and being around my friends, and not necessarily worrying about how I'm doing. And then as I got older it started being more about, I want to win, and I want to see my teammates win, and I want to see them get better, I want to get better, and I want to beat other people. – P3

You have to have a mentality where you always want to win, I think with the best athletes there's like winning is almost kind of everything. And when you don't win, it's like almost heartbreaking when you don't win. And when you do win it's like the, almost the best feeling in the world, like for the top athletes, I know... So I always think that like, winning is a huge part of being an athlete. They have a drive that kind of pushes them to do whatever it takes. – P2

Participants often discussed a childhood focus on enjoyment of sport that transformed into an emphasis on performance, where enjoyment comes from playing well. The performance focus and competitive orientation of these responses provide support for the details of the lifestyle decisions (e.g., “fuel my body properly” for performance) in the previous section. It seems that the passion for sport and commitment to improved performance drive one another and help maintain the athletic lifestyle. In turn, the consistent lifestyle decisions seem to help strengthen and confirm athletic identity.

### **Theme Connections**

While each of the themes can be conceptualized as influencing the others, participant accounts suggest that the realities of the sport context help produce the interconnections between identification as an athlete and the athletic lifestyle. Although participants contribute to the athletic context, they are individual agents in a larger sport culture. The following summary shows the connectedness of the themes.

### **Themes 1-3: Self and Athlete & Related Lifestyle within Competitive Context**

Each of the three themes are woven together in the discussion of competitive athletic environments. More specifically, athletes can strive to maintain their identities (theme 1) by reaching higher levels; thus, athletes can engage in lifestyle behaviors

(theme 3) to work toward meeting the demands of the sport culture (theme 2). Athletes may develop self-primarily as athlete orientations as they make continual decisions to excel within the athletic environments.

As the competitive levels in sports become more intense, participants can see that their “future depends on” their athletic performance (quotation from P6). Participants seem to be working toward maintaining an identity that they may have developed in childhood (see Table 1: Years Played). Due to the pressure to play at an elite level, performance can impact identity. P6 and P8, male and female soccer players, detailed these factors:

I think success plays a big part into the identity and me doing well and playing well and being a good player. I think that's the biggest thing that shapes your identity. Obviously if you have a bad game or something like that you can, it does take a lot away from you... It can be a difficult one because, I think being an athlete, I think performance comes first and if you, if you're not playing well or the team's not doing well, it's, it's definitely difficult sometimes. – P6

I would build my confidence based on how well I was doing, but then I started realizing that like no matter how well you do, I guess it feels good for a little bit, or it hurts for a little bit if you do really bad, but it never like lasts... and it's just risking building your whole self-concept on that... you want to be competitive, work hard, perform well, but if you don't, you're human and it happens and it's not who you are. – P8

The responses above suggest that much of identifying as an athlete is based on performing well, so it can be difficult to untangle the connections between identity and performance. Further, these connections between identity and performance may seem more difficult to separate when considering the large amount of time that athletes commit

to lifestyles where they strive for performance excellence. The daily decisions made as a part of the athletic lifestyle can strengthen and confirm identities of athletes. This connection between identity and lifestyle was discussed by P4 when she explained, “I don't constantly think that like, ‘Oh, I'm Hispanic American,’ or, ‘I'm female’” but that she “works toward” and “values” improvement as an athlete. P4 explains that her central identities are those in which she can see identity confirming lifestyle behaviors (e.g., training as an athlete).

As explained in the preceding descriptions, lifestyle decisions and identity can influence the other. These interactions occur within the larger athletic culture. Such understandings presented in connections among themes display the intricacies of athletic identities and athletic lifestyles within the sport context.

### **Themes 1-2: Current Contextual Factors and the Orientation of the Self**

The first theme, focusing on orientations regarding self-views, and the second theme, centering on constant engagement in sport culture, have relevant connections. More specifically, the difference between orientation groups (i.e., organization of self-views) seems to be explained by current experiences and expectations. Participant accounts demonstrate that participants in self-primarily and secondarily as athlete orientation groups had similar background experiences. For example, in the Family Involvement subtheme, P4 and P12 explained playing softball from a young age and being strongly influenced by their fathers' love for the game. However, similar to others in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group, P12 explained that injury experiences and thinking of her future post-graduation impacted her self-view; she discussed no

longer viewing athletic identity as central to her self-concept. With these two participants, as well as other participants, the difference between orientation groups seems to be explained by current contextual factors (e.g., upperclassmen experiences; anticipated opportunities) as opposed to past experiences.

In the discussion of the self within the sport culture, current realities seemed to influence male and female upperclassmen differently. The female upperclassmen noticed that their athletic careers were coming to an end; the male participants who were finishing their collegiate eligibility discussed professional playing aspirations in the US or internationally. Thus, these findings may reflect the differences in the sport realm where there are more professional opportunities for male athletes. If the contextual factors were similar for men and women after college (i.e., if there were more professional opportunities for women in sports), it is possible that more of the female participants would have professional playing aspirations and hold athletic identity more centrally as they had before nearing graduation.

Additionally, on the topic of current contextual experiences, participants categorized as operating from a self-primarily as athlete orientation generally discussed current contextual experiences related to sport. In contrast, participants in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group often described current contextual experiences that were sport-related and non-sport-related. Two participants who primarily discussed athletic contextual factors seemed to largely define their self-view in relation to their athletic experiences and feats (see Table 5 for external meaning making rationale). Participants who described broader contextual factors and/or had more learning

experiences in sport generally responded from a standpoint where they recognized contextual influences, but seemed to have greater ownership of self-views (i.e., transition to internal meaning making; self-authorship; see Table 5). The responses provide further evidence supporting that participants' self-views were likely impacted by perceptions (i.e., meaning making) of current contextual experiences. P2's statement below provides a representative description supporting that differences between orientation groups is likely influenced by learning experiences based on current and anticipated contextual factors:

...being an athlete is great, but it's not the only thing in life, especially once I'll be graduating soon, so I kind of have to like figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. Like I can't, I always identify myself as an athlete. It's just kind of like overcoming that cause a lot of people as soon as they start here, it's like, 'I'm an athlete.' They see it on backpacks, t-shirts, everything. Like that's who you are, that's what you identify as. But as soon as you graduate, a lot of people have a hard time adjusting to the real world because they, that's all they've known for their whole life to identify as. – P2

As detailed above, the changing context (i.e., lifelong immersion in sport culture and recognizing eventual end of athletic career) can prompt self-reflection. The participant responses suggest that the orientation of self (i.e., primarily or secondarily as athlete) is impacted by current contextual experiences (e.g., year in school; expectations of athletic career).

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe athletic identity as positioned within the multidimensional self and related social context. The investigation was guided and interpreted within the framework of the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to develop the following themes describing a more complex conceptualization of athletic identity as positioned within the holistic self and social context: Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self; Lifelong Immersion in Sport Context; and “It’s a Lifestyle”: Passion for the Game. In this chapter, the study themes are discussed within the existing literature before the presentation of implications and future directions. Before these sections, a discussion of athletic identity within the guiding RMMDI framework is provided.

The examination of athletic identity within the framing of the RMMDI is a novel, appropriate approach for better understanding the construct. Ronkainen et al. (2016a) contend that athletic identity research must show clear connections to identity theories. Further, Ronkainen et al. (2016b) argue that more research is needed to explore personal meanings that athletes attribute to their experiences. The RMMDI provides a model in which athletic identity can be positioned within the overall self-concept and social context (Abes et al., 2007); such framings are consistent with understandings in identity theories (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this study, athletic identity was positioned in different



ways in the model (see Tables 2-3), with most participants including the identity centrally ( $n = 6$ ; positioning in the core of the model) or as a salient identity ( $n = 3$ ; positioning close to the core). Thus, as the structural layout of the RMMDI framework remained the same, participant responses most often reflected athletic identity as a core identity that may be described as fully incorporated into the sense of self (Abes et al., 2007). The rationale provided by P6 can be understood as a representative point for those who positioned athletic identity as a core identity; P6 explains that athletic identity “deserves a place in the center [of his diagram]” because he has identified as an athlete for several years and his “whole life is based around” being an athlete. Most other participants included athletic identity as a salient or less salient identity on their identity mapping models. These participants described the identity as important within their self-view, but on a secondary level compared to other identities (e.g., faith identity). For example, P3 explains that being an athlete is a “big part of” her self-view, but that the identity is second to “moral and ethical” parts of her identity.

On the matter of interacting and conflicting identities, participants often described connections between athletic identity and social roles (e.g., family, friend, and student) and less often with social identities (interactions with athletic identity and gender identity were discussed by female participants; see “Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self” theme in Results for greater detail). These connections between identities may be explained by past and current contextual influences. Participants described bonding with their family members through sport involvement over several years, but many explained that their current athletic commitments resulted in less time for family, especially for

those who were from different states or countries. These understandings may explain how athletic and family identities can both interact and conflict within the self-view.

Additionally, in the collegiate sport environment, participants may see more connections between roles that they “constantly think” about or where they “work toward” daily improvement (e.g., athlete, student, friend; quotation from P4). In a different context and/or with a different sample, student-athletes may be more aware of different social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation), and potentially discuss more connections between such identities and athletic identity.

Thus, consistent with understandings in the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013), identity positioning and related reflections (e.g., core aspects, salience, connections between identities) seemed to be influenced by contextual factors. Within the framing of the RMMDI, external factors seemed to consistently reinforce athletic identity rather than send messages that would lessen or detract from identification as an athlete. Further, athletes described a passion for sport that seemed to drive their dedication to athletic lifestyles within the sport context. Thus, participant responses support that athletic identity can be viewed as a central or salient part of the holistic self that can be reinforced by external influences. The following sections provide a more detailed discussion of the study findings while also connecting such understandings to the existing body of literature.

### **Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self**

The central organizing concept for this theme focused on the term “orientation.” Participants who discussed identities and traits in relation to athletic identity were

categorized into the self-primarily as athlete orientation group while those who discussed athletic identity together with their other identities and traits were described in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group. Before discussing differences in groups as connected to the literature, relevant topics from both groups will be presented.

In this study, athletic identity was listed and described as one of the few most important identities. The findings support athletic identity as a prominent identity (Burke & Stets, 2009), holding high personal value for many participants. From the positioning and responses, athletic identity was consistently listed second to faith identity. Further, athletic identity and family identity were included with a similar response rate in the mapping activity. Ward et al. (2005) explains that athletic identity may be viewed on a similar level of importance as race, gender, and other identities. In this study, athletic identity was consistently described as more central and salient than different social roles (e.g., friend, student, and significant other) and social identities (e.g., gender, race, and sexual orientation). Such findings bolster Ward et al.'s (2005) claim that athletic identity can be of high individual importance to athletes.

The study responses provide findings that both support and add to understandings in literature pertaining to the RMMDI. Jones and Abes (2013) explain that a concern in the MMDI and RMMDI framing is that social roles (e.g., family member) could be overlooked when participants are asked to position their social identities (e.g., gender) on the model. In this investigation, participants were able to choose the combination of identities that they felt were the most important to their self-view. Thus, the above

limitation was addressed in this study; also, participants provided insights into athlete perspectives on relevant identities.

For identities conceptualized as social identities in the guiding framework (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), participants often did not include privileged identities and did include marginalized identities. For instance, no male athletes listed their gender identity, but the majority of female athletes listed gender identity. Also, two of the three participants who included racial identity on their models were racial minorities. Further, no participants identified as a sexual minority, and in a similar way, only three participants listed sexual orientation on their models (those who listed sexual orientation did not position the identity as central nor salient). Thus, in this sample of collegiate athletes, social identities characterized by minority status were listed, which is consistent with findings in studies using the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Interestingly, on the discussion of privilege in identities, there was a unique finding present in this study. P5 and P9 both discussed their height as relevant to their role as athletes (P5 listed height in her model). These athletes explained that while they were an average height outside of sport, they were undersized for their sport. Thus, they felt the need to work harder to gain their positions (e.g., earn a scholarship) and have an impact in their sport. These understandings show that from an athletic viewpoint, certain characteristics that are not privileged can be of greater personal importance in the view of self.

Each orientation group in this study provided information consistent with the findings from the pilot study where participants discussed intimacy and ownership of the

athletic role (Newton et al, in press). The current investigation expands these understandings by examining the positioning of athletic identity within the self and the related rationale. In pilot work, athletic identity was described as a personal “part of” the self-concept (Newton et al., in press). The mapping activity and discussion in this investigation helped present a more complex description of this “part of” the self-view (e.g., Table 3).

For individuals in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group, findings support that participants conceptualized athletic identity as a “massive” part of who they are that is of central importance (quotation from P6). Some participants in this group described athletic identity as constituting more of the whole as opposed to a part of the self (e.g., “being an athlete is, is everything I am right now” –P10; “I don’t really know who I am outside of it [being an athlete]” –P4). Those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group describe being an athlete as an important part of their self-view that is grouped in relation with other parts of the self. Thus, pilot work helped show that athletic identity can be an intimate part of the self-concept (Newton et al., in press); the current investigation details ways in which this “part of” the self can be conceptualized (i.e., primarily; secondarily). From the lens of identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), those in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group can be described as holding a prominent athletic identity where other traits and roles (both more and less prominent) center around the athlete role. Those in the second group can be conceptualized as having an athletic identity (either more prominent or less prominent) that is seen in relation with other traits and roles.

Similarly, pilot work suggested that athletic identity and personality seem to become interwoven in a process that results in continued athletic behaviors (Newton et al., in press). Expanding on this in the current study, the self-primarily as athlete orientation group explained feeling that certain personality traits were “rooted in” being an athlete (quotation from P4). Descriptions suggest that those in this group viewed identities and traits from an athletic self-schema, where information was guided and processed through an athletic lens (Brewer et al., 1993; Markus, 1977). Few studies explicitly discuss athletic schemata; the topic is generally referenced as a concept related to athletic identity (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2016a). This current investigation presents unique findings on the topic of athletic schemata, adding to the understanding of athletic identity a range of information was described as being processed through an athletic lens (e.g., daily decisions, self-views). In addition to the discussion of athlete schemata and physical matters (see “It’s a Lifestyle”: Passion for the Game), metaphysical matters were described by participants through an athletic lens. Participants in this group discussed identities and traits as oriented around being an athlete, and at times, as predicated on being an athlete. Thus, athletes may not simply view external and personal elements from an athletic vantage point (e.g., training, body mass; Cherrington & Watson, 2010), but can also view their self-concept through the lens of an athlete.

While participants oriented their self-concept in different ways, those in both orientation groups expressed that as an athlete, certain personal traits are “developed” and “enhanced” (quotation from P3). Those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group often discussed the transfer of these traits to different settings (e.g., career), which

may be described as a proactive behavior as they were nearing the end of their athletic career (Lally, 2007).

### **Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture**

In this theme, the central organizing concept focused on the constant engagement in the sport context that provides identity confirming messages and continual opportunities for athletic advancement. It seems that early involvement in sport helped in the formation of athletic identities that were maintained through continued sport engagement (Houle et al., 2010). As participants progressed through competitive ranks, performance became more important for athletes as they worked toward reaching the higher levels. Participants explained that in childhood, enjoyment was a central aspect of sport involvement; as the competitive level increased, enjoyment became linked to performance. In this way, descriptions suggest that participant identity standards (i.e., set of meanings connected to being an athlete) evolved as the environment changed (Burke & Stets, 2009). More specifically, the athletic identity standard in childhood (e.g., fun with friends, learning skills) likely shifted within more intense athletic settings (e.g., win, perform, earn scholarship). In turn, as the athletes adjusted to the new environments, it seems that they engaged in self-verification processes where behaviors (more detail in next section) were performed so that self-perceptions would fit with new identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009).

As supported by content presented in the “Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture” theme, it seems that the competitive athletic culture can influence identity standards and also cultivate performance narratives characterized by a focus on winning and

achievement (Douglas & Carless, 2006). While different participants gave responses supporting components of a performance narrative, several aspects of performance, relational, and discovery narratives were often woven together across different interviews (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a; Carless & Douglas, 2013b). More specifically, topics such as striving for improvement in sport, feeling a sense of belonging in the athletic community, and appreciating the opportunity to earn an athletic scholarship were relevant within and across participants. It is possible that in this study of collegiate student-athletes, these aspects could be interrelated within the context (e.g., college-aged; performance tied to scholarship) when compared to other contexts (e.g., professional women's golfers; Douglas & Carless, 2006). Further, contextual influences are important to consider on the topic of meaning making.

In this study, participant meaning making provides a link between the “Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture” and “Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self” themes. In the RMMDI, the meaning-making filter describes a set of assumptions guiding how individuals organize their self-view (Abes et al., 2007). In external meaning making, contextual influences have a great impact on self-views. From a perspective of self-authorship (i.e., internal meaning making), contextual influences are present, but individuals take more ownership of their identity choices. Individuals who are in the process of moving toward self-authorship are described as transitioning to internal meaning making (Jones & Abes, 2013).

In the current investigation, the self-primarily and secondarily as athlete orientations were presented. Based on participant responses, the key difference between



these groups seemed to be current contextual factors (e.g., upperclassmen experiences; anticipating end of athletic career). Such outside experiences can impact identity as intrapersonal (i.e., sense of self) meaning making shifts (Jones & Abes, 2013). More specifically, those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group often explained learning experiences that impacted their shift in self-view. Individuals use meaning-making structures until the framing no longer makes sense within their realities (Jones & Abes, 2013). In turn, it seems that experiences of those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group resulted in changes in their meaning-making structures (i.e., intrapersonal external meaning making transitioning to internal meaning making). For instance, after injury experiences, P12 was tasked with answering the question of “Who am I as a person without softball?” In contrast, without having serious injury experiences or nearing the end of her athletic career, P4 expressed, “I don’t really know who I am outside of it [being an athlete]... it’s all I’ve ever known and I don’t think I’m going to let that go anytime soon.” Such findings demonstrate that in athletics, meaning making can shift as a result of encountering challenging experiences.

While different participants described injury experiences, the most common contextual influence among participants in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group is that they were nearing the end of their athletic careers. P2 notes, “Like I can’t, I always identify myself as an athlete... I want to be a good person and not just a great athlete.” For these participants, previous meaning-making structures no longer fit with their current contextual realities. Thus, it seems that they are attempting to prepare themselves for a well-adjusted transition that is not characterized by negative emotions

and concerns (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Lally, 2007; Giannone et al., 2017). The responses from those in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group demonstrate that with anticipated shifts in context, identities can shift as well.

Notably, the two male participants who were nearing the end of their collegiate athletic eligibility discussed professional playing aspirations. It is possible that if the female athletes in the self-secondarily as athlete orientation group had more professional sporting opportunities, they would not be faced with a contextual reality where they are tasked with preparing for the end of their careers. While fewer than two percent of those competing in collegiate sports go on to professional athletic careers (NCAA, 2018), due to differences in opportunity based on gender and sport, it seems that the two male athletes perceived having a chance to continue their careers while none of the female athletes discussed professional aspirations, which may explain the changes in their athletic identities (i.e., shifts described from central/salient to less central/salient).

Similarly, on the topic of meaning making, the point of this presentation is not to suggest that athletes cannot hold athletic identity as central while moving toward self-authorship. Nor is it suggested that the mark of self-authorship is viewing athletic identity as a less salient identity. For example, P5, P6, and P10 positioned athletic identity centrally and are categorized as transitioning to internal meaning making (see Table 5 for additional details on participant meaning making). In addition, P11 included athletic identity centrally and described taking ownership of her self-definition. More specifically, P11's accounts displayed an understanding of external expectations paired with desires and evidence of self-authoring (e.g., disproving negative stereotypes of

athletes). In this case, P11 positioned athletic identity centrally while demonstrating a perspective of internal meaning making. For other instances, it seems that in a sample of collegiate student-athletes (a period that may overlap with changes in meaning-making structures; Jones & Abes, 2013), the progression to internal meaning making may coincide with changes in athletic identity (e.g., central to less salient) due to the changing contextual factors that influence identity during this time period. Thus, the same contextual factors (e.g., nearing end of career) that can spark change toward internal meaning making can also prompt identity shifts where athletic identity is no longer central.

Further, the topic of commitment in identity theory can be viewed as a connection between the “Lifelong Immersion in Sport Culture” and the “It’s a Lifestyle’: Passion for the Game” themes. Commitment describes the level to which an individual’s interpersonal relationships in a network depend on the possession of a particular role (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this study, participants described feeling a sense of belonging in the sport community and a dedication to athletic lifestyles (these lifestyles include interaction with other athletes, especially in team sports). Further, several participants indicated that their family members have been involved in their athletic careers throughout their lives (e.g., parents played and/or valued sports). Participants explained that messages from family and friends were often encouraging (e.g., messages of support) and instructional (e.g., message to practice daily). While positive and negative external factors can influence self-views (RMMDI; Jones & Abes, 2013), participants explained that contextual messages throughout their lives largely supported their identification with

the athlete role. Thus, individuals may feel that their close relationships with family and friends have ties to athletic identity, especially as these groups seemed to support athletic involvement over several years. In turn, it seems that contextual influences (e.g., family engagement; team bond) and lifestyle behaviors (e.g., listening to parent sport advice; training with team) can influence commitment, where athletes can reason that their relationships depend on their possession of the athlete role.

### **“It’s a Lifestyle”: Passion for the Game**

The central organizing concept of this theme focuses on dedication to sport, which incorporates aspects of passion for sport and commitment to athletic performance. Participants described enjoyment of sport that often became tied to performance as competitive levels increased. During this process, participants seemed to develop a dedication to the athletic lifestyle characterized by striving for athletic improvement.

In addition to the discussion of self-schemata detailed in the first section (i.e., viewing self-concept through an athletic schema), participants described making daily decisions from an athletic perspective. Participants explained making training, eating, resting, as well as other decisions, from an athletic viewpoint. Such findings align with understandings in existing literature showing that athletes can view daily decisions from an athletic lens (e.g., Chapman & Woodson, 2016; Cherrington & Watson, 2010).

Consistently making decisions from an athletic viewpoint can reinforce athletic identity. Identity theory explains that individuals engage in behaviors that verify their identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As introduced in the previous section, competitive environments may result in shifts in identity standards. As such

standards change, individuals strive for congruence, where their identities match their personal meanings for their identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Thus, to verify their identities, athletes can make lifestyle decisions (e.g., eat healthier) that match their identity standards (e.g., belief that elite athletes are serious about their diets). When describing self-concept, P4 describes her rationale for the centrality of athletic identity in a way that connects the discussion of athletic lifestyles and the “Self and Athlete: Orientation of the Self” theme. P4 explains that she does not “constantly think” of her race and gender identities, but does “work toward” improving as an athlete consistently. This understanding can be considered as a representative quotation; in the study, athletic identity was included as one of the few most important identities and participants described lifestyle decisions that verify their athletic identities. Thus, the athletic lifestyle and athletic identity (regardless of orientation group) mutually reinforce the other within the sport context.

### **Implications**

Findings from the current investigation are relevant to the fields of sport and exercise psychology, counseling, and student development. Expert panelists have ranked recognizing the importance of athletic identity as an essential competency for counseling practitioners (Ward et al., 2005), yet current understandings of athletic identity have been limited as the complexity of the construct within the self-concept and related environment had not been explored. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine athletic identity within the holistic self and social context as informed by the RMMDI framework (Jones

& Abes, 2013). Findings from the study take an important step in providing a more complex conceptualization of athletic identity and enhancing practitioner competencies.

In this investigation, athletic identity was consistently included as one of the few most important identities for the athletes. In this sample, athletic identity was described as more central and salient than other social roles (e.g., friend, student, and significant other) and social identities (e.g., gender, race, and sexual orientation). Such findings are consistent with Ward et al.'s (2005) claim that athletic identity may be viewed on a similar level as other important identities. As athletic identity can be a personally important identity, practitioners should treat the identity with respect and sensitivity. Practitioners in helping professions follow codes of ethics that guide their decision making. To work with clients in ways that are developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and respectful of autonomy (i.e., foster the right of the clients to control the direction of their lives), practitioners should be respectful of individuals' athletic identity (American Counseling Association, 2014; Association for Applied Sport Psychology, 2011). For participants with central athletic identities, their rationale for the positioning may differ. Specifically, athletes may strongly identify with their role as athlete for a range of different reasons: being involved in their sport for most of their life; thinking of sport constantly; living an athletic lifestyle; and/or feeling a sense of belonging in the athletic community. While there are several potential reasons identified by participants in this study that may be transferable to other athletes (i.e., readers may see links between the findings and experiences of others; Tracy, 2010), it is important that practitioners

work toward understanding the various reasons athletic identity may be central to individual athletes.

Further, on the matter of counseling competencies, practitioners should help facilitate self-reflection which can help work toward the principle of beneficence (i.e., working toward the good of the client; ACA, 2014). Through self-reflection, athletes can become more aware of their self-perceptions and decide if there are aspects that they would like to change (e.g., as opposed to being forced to reflect through injury). Further, by promoting self-reflection, practitioners can point out patterns that may be unhealthy for athletes and offer strategies for change. For instance, while it does not seem that the self-primarily as athlete orientation is patently unhealthy, it does seem that with this orientation, individuals could be more susceptible to unhealthy behaviors (e.g., overtraining). Taking a developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive approach (e.g., being present with the client and working at an appropriate pace), practitioners can help athletes to broaden their identities.

Similarly, it seems that those with a self-primarily as athlete orientation could have difficulty adjusting to unexpected changes in circumstances (e.g., P12's description of injury). Research indicates that athletes can face emotional distress and difficulty coping with unanticipated circumstances such as athletic injuries (Knights, Sherry, Ruddock-Hudson & 2016; Leddy, Lambert & Ogles, 1994). It seems that such changes in circumstances would be difficult for athletes to face, especially if other personal aspects are "directly related to" and "rooted in being an athlete" as described by those in the self-primarily as athlete orientation group (quotations from P10 and P4). For example, for

those in this group, several traits (e.g., leadership and resilience) and identities (e.g., family and friend relationships) were described as centered on the athlete role.

Practitioners can recognize these connections and help athletes expand their perspectives (e.g., Leadership and resilience seem to be key for your sport. What are some ways that those qualities have been helpful for you as an athlete? [Discussion of client response.] How can you apply those qualities to other areas in your life?). In this way, practitioners can help athletes appreciate the qualities used in sport while also connecting the traits to other areas in life so that athletes do not feel that ownership of the particular qualities is predicated on having the role of athlete. Thus, by prompting self-reflection, practitioners can recognize patterns and facilitate discussion in a collaborative process toward change. To grow in meeting counseling competencies, practitioners should work toward understanding complexities of athletic identity (e.g., primary and secondary orientations; remaining current on research) while attending to individual reasons for the place of athletic identity for their clients.

To facilitate self-reflection and understand the importance of athletic identity for individual clients, practitioners can use identity mapping activities similar to the protocol outlined in this investigation (see Appendix C). In this way, practitioners and athletes can see the positioning of athletic identity within the holistic self. With the utilization of mapping identities, athletes can see the current constellation of identities within the self-concept; with this information, athletes can see ways in which they would like to adjust the positioning of certain identities. For example, an athlete may position family roles farther from the core of the model and express discomfort with the positioning. The



athlete may explain that ideally, family roles would be closer to the core in the model. The practitioner and the athlete could process potential emotions (e.g., disappointment), discuss reasons for the current position of the identity (e.g., athletic schedule interfering with family life), and make goals for change (e.g., intentionality for contacting family more often during the week). Consistent with understandings in person-centered therapy, the identity mapping activity could provide a visual representation to aid in efforts to align aspects of the real self and ideal self (Pomerantz, 2012).

Student development professionals, counselors, and sport psychology consultants should recognize the unique challenges that collegiate student-athletes face regarding identity. While college is described as a time to explore and establish identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Jones & Abes, 2013), student-athletes may feel that they already know their identity as athletes. Further, while other students are forming new identities, student-athletes may feel that they are losing an identity that had been established for several years. More specifically, descriptions in this study support athletic identity as a prominent identity; identity theorists have conceptualized prominent identities as personally valuable and enduring within the self-concept (Burke & Stets, 2009). Professionals must recognize different ways in which these understandings can impact student-athletes (e.g., underclassman feeling personally valuable identity is confirmed; upperclassman potentially facing loss of a previously enduring aspect of the self). Professionals can be helpful to student-athletes by showing an understanding of their unique experiences and offering support to student-athletes as they near the end of their careers. In addition, with an understanding of commitment, professionals can encourage

student-athletes to have wider social networks, which can help broaden their identities and lessen potential concerns related to overreliance on the athlete role.

Furthermore, professionals working with student-athletes can be helpful by understanding their place within the RMMDI framework (Jones & Abes, 2013). More specifically, professionals should recognize that they are part of a greater context that can influence the self-view of student-athletes. Thus, with an understanding of the potential impact in their roles, professionals can provide student-athletes with positive and supportive messages that support healthy identity development. In addition to remaining mindful of their impact, professionals can help educate others in the athletic sphere about their influence on athletes in order to create supportive environments across sporting levels (e.g., youth, collegiate).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The study has limitations regarding the sample. While the sample can be considered ethnically diverse and includes participants across multiple states and different countries, participants attended three universities in the Southeastern region of the US. As examining athletic identity within the RMMDI was a novel approach, narrowing the sample (i.e., student-athletes from team sports at mid-major Division I universities) limited potential variability of a purely heterogeneous group, allowing for a more focused analysis. This decision was beneficial within the scope of the investigation, but had drawbacks as few student-athletes from minority groups participated in the study. This investigation can be viewed as a base for future studies that can explore athletic identity within diverse groups. More specifically, future research should examine nuances

of athletic identity across different demographic groups (e.g., racial minorities, sexual minorities; focused analyses in homogenous groups). RMMDI literature suggests that individuals generally list marginalized identities as personally important (Jones & Abes, 2013). Thus, assessing athletic identity across minority groups could display the importance and complexity of athletic identity in relation to these social identities. Further, future research should examine athletic identity across different sport groups (e.g., comparisons between individual and team sports; college and professional sports; revenue and non-revenue sports). Such investigations can provide more information on potential nuances related to athletic identity in subgroups within the larger sport culture.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe a more complex conceptualization of athletic identity positioned within the holistic self and social context. Findings indicate that athletic identity was one of the most personally important identities within the multidimensional self. This positioning and the related orientations (i.e., self-primarily and secondarily as athlete) seem to interact with the corresponding athletic lifestyle within the broader sport context. Practitioners working with this population should work toward understanding complexities of athletic identity, continue to stay updated on identity literature, and strive to learn of the importance of athletic identity for individual athletes.

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APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

College/University:

Year in School:

Major:

Primary Sport:

Years Played:

Scholarship Status:

Playing Status (e.g., starter, rotation player, rarely play):

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about your experiences in athletics.
  - o When did you start playing sports?
  - o What sports have you played?
  - o When did you start to focus on (particular sport)?
  - o Why did you choose (particular sport)?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to be an athlete?
- In particular, what does it mean *for you* to be an athlete? How has that meaning changed over time?

## APPENDIX C

### MAPPING INSTRUCTIONS AND MODEL FIGURES

Researchers suggest that individuals have several identities or roles. For example, an individual may see him/herself as a sibling, athlete, and student. This activity allows individuals to identify relevant identities and position them on a model.

Identities include personal traits or attributes (e.g., intelligent, athletic, caring), as well as social roles or categories of group membership (e.g., race, culture, sexual orientation).

Salient, or personally important, identities are positioned closer to the core, while less salient identities are located farther from the core.

Contextual factors, or outside messages and influences, are outside of the circle. These factors can influence identity.

Please list four or more personal characteristics that are important to who you are.

Examples are included in the list below, but you should feel free to use the words that are the best fit for you.

Determined, Athletic, Caring, Intelligent, Organized

Please list six or more identities that are central to who you are. Examples are included in the list below, but you should feel free to use the words that are the best fit for you.

Gender, Race, Religion, Sexual Orientation, Social Class

Son/Daughter, Sister/Brother, Significant Other

Athlete, Student, Employee, Musician, Artist

Now that you have written your lists of identities and traits, please write these within the circle provided. Place identities or attributes that are most important to who you are in the center circle. Write the remaining identities and traits that are more important to who you are more closely to the center and the identities that are less important to you farther from the center.

## Guiding Questions and Follow Up Questions

### Core:

Tell me about the identities and attributes that you listed in the center circle in the model.

(If athletic characteristics are listed). Tell me more about the athletic traits that you listed.

### Social Identities:

Do you experience any of your multiple identities as intersecting or in interaction with the others (if so, which ones and how)?

Do you experience any of your multiple identities as conflicting (if so, which ones and how)?

Tell me more about how being an athlete is connected with other identities.

### Identity Salience:

How did the identities closer to the center of the model become important to you?

(If athletic identity or the athlete role is described as very salient or not salient). Tell me about the positioning of the athlete role.

### Contextual Factors:

On the outside of the circle, please list a few life experiences and/or family messages that have influenced your view of yourself (your identity)?

On the outside of the circle, please list a few current experiences and/or campus messages that have influenced your view of yourself (your identity)?

Tell me more about how these messages and experiences have influenced you as an athlete.

To summarize, how does being an athlete fit within your view of yourself?

RMMDI-Inspired Blank Template Model

